passerine

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Archive Warnings:	Major Character Death, Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Dream SMP
Relationships:	Wilbur Soot & Technoblade, Technoblade & Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF), Technoblade & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF), Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson, Wilbur Soot & TommyInnit
Characters:	Wilbur Soot, Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF), Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF), TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF), Cara | CaptainPuffy, Niki | Nihachu, Toby Smith | Tubbo, Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF), Clay | Dream (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Royalty, Found Family, But make it, Angst, Sleepy Bois Inc. (Video Blogging RPF) - Freeform, tommy and wilbur are princes and technoblade is a feral god that philza picked up from the woods, thats it thats the fic, mentions of techno's voices, wilbur also has voices, techno decides to help, because he has nothing better to do or so he says, no beta we die like lmanberg, Hurt/Comfort, Character Death, specific tags found before each chapter
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Aerie
Collections:	fave fics i gotta read again when they are done, Crow Cult's DSMP Favorites, Best of MCYT's, Other Fanfoms, Completed stories I've read, Long Fics to Binge, MCYT Fic Rec, pog_wizard's Writing Inspiration, Want To Read DSMP, that shit hurteded on god, late night bittersweet reads, dsmp angst shiii, Purrsonal Picks, Fics I cried to, (In)famous fanfics, Starr’s fic recs :D, favorites, favorites, Good mcyt fics (mainly sbi), dsmp fics !!!, dsmp but mostly sbi, agent_ontario's fic recs, Completed Stories I read (mostly peer pressure duo and boreal trio), cas's recs, My tears for SBI in a collection, my favourite block boys that make me enjoy living, and I will adore you forevermore, Loxe's Collection of Iconic MCYT Girls, Favorite Well Written Reads, Marigolds Discord Recs, i don't read dsmp fics (or do i??), moth's fanfic recommendations, fanfics that hurt me but i love them (authors should pay for my therapy), Fics that I have an Unhealthy Attachment to, Wani's sbi hyperfixation of (mostly) super hero fics
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passerine

by blujamas, thcscus (blujamas)

Summary

"I understand. You heard the place you loved was in trouble, so you came back, but I don't—I just—why didn't you take me?" Here it was, at last. Catharsis, or something close to it. "I would have hunted them down with you, Philza, the people who did that to your town. I would have given you your vengeance on a silver platter. I would have given you the world."

Philza didn't look guilty. He just looked tired. "I didn't hunt them down, though."

//

Or, that fic where Techno and Phil are old immortals, and Tommy and Wilbur are decidedly... not.

Notes

Technoblade and Philza are immortals. Tommy and Wilbur are... not. Angst ensues.

[DISCLAIMER, as of 28 February 2024: i do not support any of the recent unjustifiable actions of the real-life CCs some of these characters are based on. as far as i am concerned, the characters are wholly detached from said CCs and they should be treated as such. i will keep the works up, as i understand that they mean something to other people, but please refrain from associating my work with said CCs. thank you for understanding.]

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Deutsch available: [Restricted Work] by orphan_account
- Translation into suomi available: passerine (discontinued finnish translation, first chapter only) by orphan_account
- Translation into Português brasileiro available: passerine (PT-BR) by bluebirdwritess
- Translation into Čeština available: Passerine [CZ překlad] by Michelle_Fantasy

like a fox to a burrow (like an eagle to an aerie)

Chapter Summary

> The voices led him to kingdoms and shires and towns—it didn't matter what they offered him in return; the voices didn't demand coin, they demanded blood. He fought for bold men and stupid men, greedy kings and starry-eyed rebels. He fought for armies doomed to fail and dragged them into the light of glory. He had lost count of how many allies he'd fought beside—after a time, their names and faces had faded into the recesses of his hazy memory.
>
> And then there was the Angel of Death.
>
> //
>
> Or, eternity, empires and the emperors that rule them

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He must have had a life before this. A mother, a father, a home. Maybe sisters, or brothers. But it had been so long—*too* long—and now all he knew was this bloody game. His hands knew no other shape than fists curled tightly around a sword, swinging eternally, finding its mark through skin and bone.

They all tried to run, of course. They built walls and cowered in corners, but he always found them. Sometimes, they begged. Sometimes, they chose to jump from cliffs rather than face his reckoning. And sometimes, they stared back at him with eyes as empty as his own and welcomed death with open arms. Those were the ones he envied the most.

Technoblade never dies, they whispered around campfires and funeral pyres.

He prayed that that wasn't true.

The voices led him to kingdoms and shires and towns—it didn't matter what they offered him in return; the voices didn't demand coin, they demanded blood. He fought for bold men and stupid men, greedy kings and starry-eyed rebels. He fought for armies doomed to fail and dragged them into the light of glory. He had lost count of how many allies he'd fought beside—after a time, their names and faces had faded into the recesses of his hazy memory.

And then there was the Angel of Death.

He was one of the very few people with a reputation that matched Technoblade's. He'd heard of the angel through whispered stories and snatches of tavern gossip. *I heard he has obsidian*

wings, one patron would say to another over a cup of ale. *I heard he once massacred an entire army, all by himself. He makes even the Green God afraid.*

Technoblade had begun to imagine a ruthless man—an immortal butcher with the same wretched grin as his. But Philza was not an avenging angel. He was just Philza.

They'd met by coincidence, in a land of ice and snow. It was barren, but they'd made quick work of it, together—first as allies and then as friends. Through it all, Philza had smiled instead of grinned, laughed instead of cackled. On calmer days, they'd wile away time with tea and chess, and silent meditations that quieted the screaming in Techno's head, if only for a little while.

"You know," Techno had said during one of their sparring matches (they had to stay in shape, of course, because peacetimes never lasted as long as people hoped), "the stories never talk about this side of you."

Philza had paused, a small, amused smile on his face. "Oh?" he'd said. "What do the stories talk about, then?"

"They call you the Angel of Death." Techno dug his heels in as Philza resumed an onslaught of blows with his dulled sword. "They said you leave a path of destruction in your wake that nothing—*ha*!" Techno parried and went on the offensive. "—that nothing is sacred to you."

Their blades met. They pushed against each other, trying to gain an upper hand, and it was only because they were standing so close that Techno noticed the shift in Philza's eyes: a momentary coldness that was as brutal as the blizzard raging outside. It was there and gone in an instant. Light returned, and Philza laughed as he pushed back against Techno's sword.

"Stories are curious things," Philza said as he swung again, barely giving Techno time to dodge. "Some of them are true…"

He moved so quickly. Techno could do nothing but stand there as Philza rushed him with a hilt to the ribs, knocking Techno backwards onto the training room floor. Techno scrambled to his knees, but Philza was already standing over him with his sword held high above his head, his eyes glimmering with an emotion Techno couldn't place. For once in his immortal life, kneeling there in front of the first person he called *friend*, Technoblade felt hunted.

And then Philza lowered his weapon. He smiled gently down at Techno—the soft smile Techno was used to—and offered Techno a gloved hand.

"… and some of them are not," Philza finished. "So. Best of two out of three?"

"You're a bastard," Techno said playfully, even as the voices screamed, *run, run, run.* He took Philza's offered hand and pulled himself up beside the man that he was sure could have cut him in two, no matter how dulled the sword's edge was. As Philza patiently moved Techno through all the things he'd done wrong (small things like foot placement and his hilt grip being an inch off), Techno found it equal parts amusing and frightening that despite his eons of bloody fighting, it took only a few minutes of sparring for Philza to find flaws in his technique. But then again, Techno's technique wasn't particularly polished; it took only one

brutal swing to fell most people. Something told him that Philza would be harder to kill than that.

They conquered nations, he and his golden-haired friend. They were bathed in glory, twin gods shining in the middle of a bloody fields. But as their empire grew, so did their enemies. They came in droves, day after day, and before long Techno had forgotten what peace tasted like. The days were long and the nights were longer; every flicker of movement was a spy in the shadows, every ally was a potential traitor, every word was a declaration of war. Their home had become a target for a thousand armies.

Through it all, his one constant was Philza—until he wasn't. Technoblade simply looked up one day from a map detailing enemy lines and realized he'd been talking to empty air. He had no idea how long he'd been alone, sitting in a dusty library with stale tea untouched in the corner. He had no idea if Philza ever said he was leaving, or if he simply went as he arrived suddenly, swiftly, like a snowstorm.

Afterwards, there was hardly any point in maintaining the empire. The voices were getting bored, anyway. They wanted more. A fresh fight, more stories. So Techno took his sword and his shield, and abandoned ship. He'd done it a million times before, but the thought of a chess board lying unused in a crumbling castle made him feeling something close to regret.

Technoblade wandered the world, trying to appease the voices. Neither of them were ever satisfied. No matter how much chaos he dealt, there was always more work to be done. So he worked. He had no idea for how long. All he remembered from that bloody time was a sense of unfulfillment, like a story had been left unfinished halfway through. Years. Decades. Maybe more. It hardly mattered.

In the end, he knew, it would all be the same. The world would end, and he would remain—always fighting, always alone.

He didn't know what brought him to the kingdom in the first place. Did he really have to see it for himself? Was it simply to satiate his curiosity? Was he bored? Or did he hear of a kingdom untouched by the wars and petty grudges of its neighbors—keeping its peace and neutrality for a century—and take it as a challenge? Whatever it was, when Technoblade stood under the shadow of a gilded castle, watching its flags flutter lazily in the summer breeze, he felt a flicker of a once-familiar emotion stir in his heart. There was something about the cobblestone walls and towers rising towards the sky that reminded him of a different palace, somewhere cold and far away.

"Hello, stranger!" one of the guards at the gates called out. "You sightseeing?"

Technoblade paused at the man's cheerful tone. Most of the guards that caught sight of Techno's sword and blood-red cape were quick to draw their weapons, but aside from spears that seemed more decorative than threatening, the guards at the gates didn't seem to be on guard at all. *Hubris*, the voices said, *this is a kingdom of hubris.*

"Perhaps," Techno drawled, indulging the guard. "Although, I suppose I'm more curious about the inside, rather than the outside."

“Why didn’t you just say so!” The guard beckoned Techno forwards. “The castle is always open for tourists. Just come right in!”

That was how Techno found himself walking leisurely down the halls of a castle that, under normal circumstances, he would have been storming, blades drawn. The guards did draw the line at his weaponry, and made him discard his swords at the door—as if Technoblade needed more than his hands (and sometimes, not even those) to wreak havoc. The castle’s laxness in security was disproportional to the opulence within: lush carpet softened Techno’s footsteps, elegant tapestries decorated the walls, flowers bloomed from vases as tall as him, and oil paintings in gilded frames. Paintings of solemn landscapes, of wild animals roaming a cultivated garden, of a dark-haired boy astride a white horse, a hint of a smile in the corner of his mouth, and of the king—

Technoblade stopped under the painting, nestled between vases of irises. *Oh,* he thought. *That’s why*. It wasn’t hubris making this kingdom think they were protected from everything. It was their king.

Rendered in paint and shadow, he looked just as Technoblade remembered, the years leaving no mark on his immortal face. He was standing behind a modest throne, his hand laid gently on the shoulder of a dark-haired woman that must be his queen. In the queen’s arms was a golden-haired toddler, sleeping peacefully. On the floor by her feet, with his legs crossed under him, was another child, older, with a gold circlet nestled in his brown curls.

“Wilby!”

A child’s shrill voice rang down the hall. Technoblade’s hand itched instinctively for his sword as he turned from the painting and found himself facing the very same boy from the painting.

The prince. He was a tall, lean thing, his face still holding the faint traces of boyhood. He couldn’t have been more than fourteen. In the painting, he’d been grinning, forever immortalized in delight. But here, he was staring, his dark eyes unnaturally focused, as if Techno was a particularly interesting book he was quietly picking apart in his head. Techno had seen that expression many times in the faces of wizened generals looking over battlefield arrangements.

“Hullo,” the prince said cautiously.

Technoblade found himself raising his hand in a small wave. “Hello.”

“Wilby! Wait for me!” the first voice called again, closer this time, and heralding the appearance of another child around the bend of the hallway. By his lavish attire and the small army of servants following fretfully after him, this could only be the younger prince, barely more than a babe in the painting but now a rather loud six-year-old.

The younger prince marched purposefully towards his older brother—*Wilby?*—and clung decidedly to his side as they both stared up at Techno.

“And who are you?” the small prince said, in what he must have intended to be a threatening tone. But he sounded only like he really was: a child.

“A visitor,” said Techno, unsure of what he was meant to say now.

“Have you come to have an audience with our father?” the older prince asked in a decidedly more level tone.

“You can’t,” the younger prince snapped at once, tightening his hold on his older brother’s shirtfront. “Dad promised today was *our* day with him, so you can just leave now, thank you!”

“Tommy, calm yourself.”

“But Wilbur, Dad said—”

“I know what Father said, Tommy.” The older prince—Wilbur, then, not Wilby; gods know what Techno would have said and done if the man had truly named his son *Wilby*—was still staring at Techno like a vulture waiting for a dying animal to drop. “So, visitor, what is your business here?”

“I have no business,” Technoblade said. “I am visiting. Sightseeing. I’m a traveler.”

“First you are a visitor and now you are a traveler.” A smile tugged at the prince’s lips. “This exchange would be much easier if we knew your name.”

Technoblade glanced at the servants lining the hall behind the princes, clearly in earshot but dutifully maintaining the illusion of privacy. But if he knew their father at all, he’d know that most of those standing guard around his sons would be lethal killers—he just hadn’t anticipated the arrival of a god. What would they do if they heard his name? Would any of them recognize it? Would they know what it meant to have him stand before their young princes? How long would they last against him?

As he looked down at the two brothers, he found them small. He could crush them under the heel of his boot like ants.

But instead, Techno found himself saying, “My name is—”

“Technoblade?”

Technoblade lifted his eyes from the young princes and found himself staring at their father.

“Philza?”

Philza stood at the end of the hallway, undoubtedly following the familiar cadence of his sons’ voices. He glanced at them now, still standing before Technoblade like unwitting sheep waiting for slaughter. But Philza’s eyes showed no fear. Instead, when he looked back at Techno, he only smiled, his face softening with a familiar relief—the expression of a man after a long, hard-fought war, seeing peace on the horizon at last.

“Old friend,” said Philza. “It’s nice to see you again.”

Traitor, the voices clamored, *traitor traitor traitor traitor—*

“Father!” Wilbur’s voice brought them back to reality; this was a different castle, a different time. “Do you know this stranger?”

“Well, obviously, Wilbur.” Tommy rolled his eyes. “Dad just said his name, didn’t he? Technoblade. That’s a dumb name.”

“Tommy!” Philza reprimanded, with no real heat behind his words. He drew closer to them, his steps quiet and even. The servants that had followed the two boys bowed in deference to their liege, despite him wearing no crown. In fact, he looked just as much as a traveler as Techno was—dressed in a simple trousers and shirt, perfect for blending in, perfect for a man on the run.

“It’s been a long time,” Philza said when he reached them, putting a gentle hand on the top of Tommy’s blond head. The boy arched towards the touch like a sunflower reaching towards the sun. Technoblade didn’t know if the move was calculated, or just a simple act of affection. Or, knowing Philza, both. “How have you been?”

“How have I been?” Techno repeated numbly, feeling a familiar chill creep into his bones. “Phil, I—”

“Actually,” Philza interrupted, before kneeling to look his boys in the eyes. “Wilbur, take your brother out to the garden for a bit, yeah?”

Wilbur pouted, for once looking like a boy his age. “But you said—”

“I know what I promised, and I keep my promises, don’t I?” Philza ruffled Wilbur’s hair and then Tommy’s. “I’ll join you in a moment. I just need to have a talk with Technoblade here.”

Wilbur stared at his father for a long moment, as if weighing the truth of his words, before nodding. He took his brother’s hand in his and began leading him away. “C’mon, Tommy,” he said. “Let’s play outside.”

“Technoblade’s still a dumb name,” Tommy muttered as they passed him, closely followed by their servants.

Wilbur met Technoblade’s eyes, just for a moment, before they were gone—down the hall, out of sight, leaving Technoblade alone with the king. Technoblade turned towards Philza, his old friend, and found the smile wiped clean from his face.

Philza gestured down the hall. “Walk with me?”

Technoblade could only nod, and follow Philza.

They were quiet as they walked. Techno remembered days like these during their time together, long days of companionable silence as they simply existed together. But there was something different this time. There was an edge. Techno could sense Philza sizing him up,

tallying his hidden weapons, calculating his improvements. In turn, Techno mapped his escape routes as Philza led him through the halls, then up a sweeping flight of stairs. He did not want to expect violence from Philza, but he hadn't expected to be left behind, either.

They reached a balcony overlooking a garden, where most of the flowers indoors undoubtedly came from. Wisteria and ivy grew around marble pillars; rosebushes and dandelions and carnations bloomed en masse at the foot of elaborate stone statues. At the center of the garden was a weeping willow, its branches providing shade for the two boys chasing each other across the grass. Their laughter echoed through the glade, reaching even Techno and their father high up on the balcony.

For a while, the two of them just watched the two princes. Wilbur was obviously faster than Tommy, but he slowed his pace just enough for his little brother to have fun chasing his heels.

"They're a handful." Philza's soft tone turned Techno's attention away from the princes. The king was almost smiling, but the hard glint in his eyes didn't disappear. "Wilbur was quieter, before Tommy was born. A little bookworm, holed up in his room all day. But I have a feeling you didn't drop by for silly stories like that." Philza turned towards Techno. "So, go ahead. Let me have it."

Techno didn't know what he was meant to feel. He didn't know what he meant to *say*. For years, he'd put Philza out of his mind, determined to forget that interlude of peace. He'd let the memories fester like untreated wounds, and now he thought he'd rather die of the infection than acknowledge out loud that it was real, that the pain was there at all.

"I didn't mean to drop by," Techno said eventually. "I didn't know this place was yours. I can leave, if you—"

"No." Philza shook his head. "Don't leave. Truth be told, this reunion was inevitable. Or, I hoped it was."

"How long have you been here?"

Philza considered. "How long has this kingdom been standing?"

"Phil, that's—"

"I know. People like us aren't meant to stay in one place for too long." Philza sighed and turned back towards the horizon. He leaned his arms against the wrought-iron railings and looked out at the land beyond—the slope of the distant mountains, the kingdom that stretched on and on, unaware that their immortal king was all that stood between them and destruction. "I found a small town while I was traveling, made it something more. I told myself I would leave after a year, and then it became two years, three years, a decade. I *did* leave eventually, before they figured out why their town mayor never aged. But then I found out, the moment I left…" Philza's expression turned cold. "They were annihilated. I came back and everything, every*one* had been burnt to the ground. It was just ashes. Everything I built… There were survivors, of course, and they blamed their leader for leaving, *of course*—as they should. So I stayed. I built it back up again, from a small, decimated town to what you see today. As far as

the people know, leadership has been passed on from one king to another who looks vaguely like him. I'm sure the eldest of them have their rumors, but is it really so bad to be known?"

Technoblade didn't realize, until Philza turned back to look at him, that he expected an answer to his question. But all Technoblade could say was, "Is this why you left me behind?"

"Techno—"

"I understand. You heard the place you loved was in trouble, so you came back, but I don't—I just—*why didn't you take me?"* Here it was, at last. Catharsis, or something close to it. "I would have hunted them down with you, Philza, the people who did that to your town. I would have given you your vengeance on a silver platter. I would have given you the world."

Philza didn't look guilty. He just looked tired. "I didn't hunt them down, though."

"What?"

"The people who burned down my town. I didn't hunt them down, as much as I wanted to. They were long gone by the time I arrived, and at that moment, my people needed a leader, not a hunter. And I didn't bring you because—"

"Because I don't know when to be either."

They stood there, letting the words settle in the silence that stretched tauter and tauter like a rope around Technoblade's neck.

Deny it, he wanted to shout, *tell me I'm wrong.*

Philza did not.

"I don't need to hear this from you," Technoblade spat. A well of old hurt and anger, once dried up, began to fill anew. "Do your sons even know what you are? *Who* you are? The Angel of Death, domesticated. What a farce."

Philza stiffened. "You know not of which you speak."

"I once saw you tear a man apart with your bare hands, and now you're telling me about leadership? About kindness?"

"I said nothing of kindness. If I had completely renounced my ways, my kingdom would not be what it is today. Domesticated dogs still bite."

Philza stepped towards him until they were eye-to-eye. Despite the accusations Techno hurled at him, despite their bloody history, Techno had never truly seen Philza angry. But he had a feeling that if he kept running down this road headfirst, he might find himself knowing the full extent of his old friend's wrath. Philza's eyes were hard as flint—one spark away from combustion.

Technoblade glanced down at the garden. Phil followed his gaze until they were both staring back at the two boys below, who'd ceased their playing to wonder at their father and the

stranger.

They couldn't have heard a thing of what Philza or Techno said, but Wilbur stood with his head cocked inquisitively to the side, as if he were turning over the words.

"*Dad*!" Tommy shouted. "Are you almost finished?"

"Almost!" Philza called back. "I'll be right down, kids!"

Tommy elbowed Wilbur and said something that made the other boy throw his head back in laughter. Then the two of them took off, back to their games, back to their honeyed childhood. When Technoblade turned to Phil again, the king's expression had turned considerably softer. Techno could live another thousand years and still never understand how easily Philza could hide his fury.

"I wasn't trying to… settle down," Philza said, quietly now, as if he was imploring a child to stop a tantrum. His eyes were still on his sons below. "I was content, for a while, to watch the kingdom grow. But these mortals and their short, fitful lives… they draw you in, Technoblade. I used to think they were moths drawn to flame, doomed to catch fire for the most inconsequential things. We've seen their wars, you and I. We've fought them. We both know the things they do to each other." Philza took hold of the balcony railings as if it was the only thing keeping him from floating away. "But over the years I've also learned of the things they do *for* each other. Their lives will always be one year, one week, one day short, but it doesn't seem to matter much to them. They live anyway. They love anyway. Forgive an old god for wanting a piece of that for himself."

A late morning breeze passed through, carrying with it the scent of flowers and the shredded remains of Techno's anguish. The fury was still there, and the feeling of a betrayal so grand it might never be bridged, but the exhaustion had begun to settle in. Techno was used to quick brawls and long hunts, but verbal altercation was not something he'd ever trained for—mostly because he had not cared to speak to anyone that mattered since… since forever, perhaps.

And maybe Philza had been tired, too, of their life before. Always fighting, never safe. And although Techno thought it was only a matter of time before this game of peace was over, he thought maybe he could start to understand why Phil took the chance. It was a foolish move, and Technoblade would scoff at it for the rest of their immortal lives, but it would not be the worst choice anyone had ever made. Technoblade had seen the worst, and this was barely a drop in the ocean of bad decisions.

Still. It was stupid. One look at Philza and Technoblade realized he must know it, too.

"Are they like you?" Techno asked at last, unsure what answer he was waiting for. "Your boys?"

Philza sighed. "I would not wish my fate on my worst enemy, least of all my own children." His hands tightened around the railings. "They take after their mother. Mortal. *Good*, in all ways. I thank every god that has ever existed for that. But sometimes…"

“Sometimes?” Techno prompted when the silence stretched too long.

Philza’s jaw clenched. “It’s Wilbur. He speaks of voices—”

“*Voices*?”

Philza met Techno’s eyes. A conversation from lifetimes ago replayed in Techno’s mind—a moment of vulnerability in a castle not so different from this one, where he had spilled his secrets as easily as he spilled blood. *The voices, Phil, they demand blood*. There was a world’s worth of agony in Philza’s stare, a burden only understood by a parent fearing for a child.

“I am glad he is not like me,” Philza said. “But sometimes I fear he is growing more and more like *you*.”

Techno’s breath hitched in his throat. He resisted the urge to look down again, to search the grass for the boy with the ancient eyes.

The voices began to sing.

Not alone, they said. *Not alone, not alone, not alone—*

“No,” Techno said, curling his hands into fists and digging his nails into flesh until they drew blood—his daily penance. “He is but a *child*.”

Techno paused. What was he talking about? What did it matter what Wilbur was? What was this sudden ache in his chest, something telling of a far deeper wound, an older affliction? He did not know this boy. He should not care. He *did* not care.

But then Philza seized him by the wrist, as if he knew Techno was about to take off running, and forced him to meet his tortured gaze.

“That is why I had hoped you would come. Truth be told, I was very close to looking for you myself. I cannot do this by myself, Technoblade, as much as I want to. You’re the only one —”

“You want my help,” Techno said dully. “*My* help, after you abandoned me. After you denounced my ways and called me a monster.”

Philza flinched. “I would *never* call you that, my friend.”

Friend. The word that Technoblade had only truly understood in the days of snow and sweet tea.

“I don’t owe you anything,” Technoblade said quietly. “I don’t owe that—that *child* anything.”

“I know.”

“And I have better things to do with my time.”

“I know.”

“After all you did, I shouldn’t even be listening to you right now. I should just leave.”

“I *know*, Techno, I know.”

And then Philza did something Technoblade would never, in a hundred or a million years, have expected him to do. He *kneeled*. Philza, once-emperor, presently king, Angel of Death, kneeled before Technoblade, grasping pathetically at his cloak, his golden hair bowed. The voices were a chorus of a disgust and disdain—*oh, how the mighty have fallen*—and when Philza spoke again, his voice wavered.

“I am sorry, truly, for leaving. But I am asking you, *begging* you, to do this for me. For my son. For the friendship that we once shared, Techno. Please. *Please*. I do not know how much time the gods will give us.”

“What will you have me do?” Techno demanded, his own voice fraying at the edges. “What do you expect from me, Phil?”

Philza looked up at him, his face a study in agony. “Stay. Stay and help, as much as you can. And together, maybe we can help you, as well.”

The voices paused. Just for a moment. Just for a breath, as they all considered the weight of Philza’s words. And, gods, that silence—however brief, however fleeting—was the sweetest thing Technoblade had ever heard.

We can help you. What did that mean, exactly? What would that entail?

Technoblade didn’t know, and didn’t care. He’d come here in search of a kingdom of peace, and he’d found it. *Forgive an old god for wanting a piece of that for himself*, Philza had said. And what was peace if not the silence? Was that not freedom, at last?

So as the voices began to chant anew, an immortal hunter offered an immortal king his hand. The sun climbed higher towards the heart of the sky as Technoblade pulled Philza to his feet, and they were on equal ground once more.

He had no idea what he was doing. But there was no true alternative. So Technoblade met his old friend’s gaze and said, “Alright. You and me, one more time.”

Chapter End Notes

> Hello! Before you proceed, I would just like to note that the portrayal of the voices in this fic is not meant at all to parallel real-life mental issues! I would like everyone to keep this in mind. Be respectful, and be kind. Thank you :)

like carillon bells (the house of Augustus rings)

Chapter Summary

"You look at him like you look at me, and I don't know what to make of that."

Father's gaze pinned Wilbur to his seat, even more than the soreness of his body did. Even Tommy had fallen quiet, sensing –in the way that younger siblings do—that his brother was in the sort of trouble that required absolute silence.

"And how do I look at you, Wil?" Father asked.

//

Or, flowers, family and the futility of trying to outrun fate.

Chapter Notes

Chapter's trigger warnings are as follows:
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-
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Panic attacks, death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wilbur did not know what to make of the visitor. The traveler. Whatever he was.

Father had come down to the garden with him, and Wilbur could tell he was sad. He didn't know if the visitor had been the cause, or something else. Someone else.

"A formal introduction is in order," Father had told Wilbur and Tommy. "This is Technoblade. An old friend. He'll be tutoring you for a while, Wilbur."

Wilbur had stared up at the man, seeing him in the soft morning light at last. *Technoblade*. Tommy was right—it was a pretty dumb name. And one Wilbur had heard before, though he wasn't sure where.

He was tall and lean, and most likely a few years older than Wilbur. He was dressed like him, too, with poofy sleeves that Tommy always said made him look like an old man. An emerald earring hung from Technoblade's left ear, similar to the one that Father wore on a golden

chain around his neck, tucked secretively under his dress shirt. Was he some sort of royalty, too, then? Some foreign prince or a distant cousin that Father never bothered to tell Wilbur about? Father kept many secrets; this may just be one of a million.

Technoblade had taken one look at Wilbur, nodded, and then said, “We’ll start at dawn,” before leaving them.

Wilbur had stared after him, perplexed. “What…?”

Father had struggled to keep a smile off his face. “That’s Techno for you.”

Now they were sitting in the dining hall, each to their own thoughts—except Tommy, whose thoughts must always come out of his mouth, regardless of who was or wasn’t listening.

“—and Wilbur tripped me but I got up very quickly, you saw that didn’t you, Dad? Dad? Didn’t you?”

“I saw, I saw,” Father said distractedly. He was staring down at his half-eaten plate as if it held the secrets of the universe. Wilbur assumed he was only doing it so he wouldn’t be staring at Mother’s empty seat.

She’d been taking more and more of her meals in their bedroom. Tommy hadn’t noticed yet, but Wilbur did. Wilbur always did.

“And this Techno fellow, he’s a bit of an odd one, isn’t he? Will he be training me, too? Will I have to wake up at dawn like Wilbur?”

Wilbur grimaced. “Please don’t remind me, Tommy.”

Tommy stuck his tongue out at him from across the table. “It’s not like you have any other plans. I’m sure you’ll just be staying up reading again.” He gestured dramatically to himself. “I, for one, would *love* to be under the tutelage of Mister Technoblade, stupid as his name may be.”

The two of them turned to their father—one with starry-eyed expectation, the other with morbid curiosity.

Father sighed fondly before ruffling Tommy’s hair. “Sorry, little bud. Maybe we can find someone else for you. I’m sure the Captain would be willing to—”

“But I want the *Blade*,” Tommy whined.

Wilbur snorted. “Yeah, as if you could even wake up early enough. You’ll still be in bed by noon, I can see it now.”

Father gave Wilbur a cheeky grin he only reserved for his eldest son. “Tell you what, Tommy, if you can wake up with Wilbur, then you can watch him train with Techno.”

“*Truly?”* Tommy kicked back from the table, nearly upsetting Father’s glass of wine. “Good night, then! Early to bed, early to the prize, as they always say!”

“Who says that?” Wilbur said, but Tommy had already gone off, leaving Wilbur with their father and the silence.

For a while, the only sound were utensils scraping against plates and Wilbur’s heartbeat in his ears. He would never admit it to Tommy or anyone, but his relationship with Father was always better with his brother around. It wasn’t that Wilbur didn’t love his father, or that he thought his father didn’t love him. Wilbur couldn’t remember it happening, but somewhere along the way of studying warfare and politics, of staring up at the throne that would one day be his, of learning how to be a prince, he’d forgotten how to be a son.

And sometimes, when Father thought he couldn’t see, Father would look at him with a bottomless grief, like he was mourning something already lost.

It should be Tommy, Wilbur had thought. Sunny Tommy, who managed to charm everyone he met, in spite of—or perhaps because of—his loud disposition. Not him. Not when Father looked at him like that.

Wilbur swallowed the last of his dinner and was set to go, if not for his father speaking once more.

“Wilbur?”

“Yes, Father?”

Father leaned against his hand as he considered Wilbur. “Do you want me to be there for you tomorrow?”

Wilbur scoffed halfheartedly. “I’m not a child, Father.”

“Of course,” Father said. “But Technoblade is still a stranger to you.”

Wilbur pursed his lips as he thought about his father’s words. “Do you trust him?”

“Yes,” Father replied at once.

Wilbur nodded. “Then I trust him.”

Father stared at him for a long minute, and then nodded. There was nothing else to say, it seemed, and so Wilbur left, leaving his father to the quiet.

Tommy’s door was firmly shut by the time Wilbur arrived at their sleeping quarters. Wilbur’s own door stood ajar, waiting. Moonlight spilled from the arched windows, painting everything in silver: the bed littered with half-finished books, and the desk bearing scars from Wilbur’s manifold frustrations in writing music for the guitar that sat discarded on the floor. Mother had given him that guitar for his tenth birthday. He used to play lullabies (or spooky songs, when he was in the mood for older-brother mischief) for Tommy, before Tommy decided he was a big man, and moved out to the bedroom across the hall.

His body felt heavy with thoughts. Technoblade—the boy who looked not much older than him, now tasked at tutoring him at… at *what*? Father had not been forthcoming with that, amongst other things.

With a sigh, Wilbur grabbed the guitar from the floor and dragged it with him to the window. As he plucked idly at the strings, he gazed out at the horizon beyond the glass: the sprawling lawns of the castle ending at the foreboding gates, and then after that, his kingdom. His birthright.

He played a single discordant chord. Nothing had come easily to him, recently. Music, literature, conversation—everything, all at once, had become taxing. Even laughing with his brother felt like a chore.

Wilbur's fingers stilled on what was undoubtedly going to be another bad note. Something was moving, down on the lawn. He squinted at the figure until it came into sharper focus.

"Technoblade?"

Wilbur pressed his face closer to the glass, just to make sure his eyes had not deceived him. There were many people in the kingdom with pink hair, but perhaps fewer who also moved with the lethal grace of a python.

Technoblade walked across the lawn, and disappeared past the gates without a glance back. It wasn't until his breaths fogged up the window completely that Wilbur realized he was hyperventilating. He pulled away from the glass and stumbled over his guitar on his way to his bed. He pulled the covers over himself, as if the darkness would dampen his thoughts.

Where is he going? followed by *Will he come back? Will he come back? Will he come back? Will he—*

"You're late."

Wilbur blinked in the dim sunlight barely breaking through the horizon. "Wha…?"

He blinked some more until he finally recognized his surroundings: the smooth marble floor, the four columns sculpted like gods bearing up the flat roof, ivy following over the roof's edge like a waterfall, curtaining them off from the rest of the garden. This was the training pavilion—Father's personal training area, where he attempted to teach Wilbur fencing before it became clear that weaponry was not to be Wilbur's forte.

"It's alright, son," Father had said, carefully tending to the cut on Wilbur's leg from his own rapier. "Kings don't really need to know how to fight. That's what armies are for." Father had sounded angry as he said this, but Wilbur somehow knew it wasn't because of him.

"But *you* know how." Wilbur had pouted, dutifully trying to hold back tears as Father applied stinging herbs to his wound.

"Well," said Father, "that's different."

“Different how?”

“Just different.” Father finished tying the bandages around Wilbur’s leg and smiled at him. “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

He never had.

But it wasn’t Father standing before Wilbur today.

“Well?” Technoblade said, gesturing to the heavy chest in the corner. “We’re burning daylight here, little prince. Hurry up.”

Wilbur blinked again. “Sorry, but how did I…?”

Technoblade stared at him quietly as they both waited for Wilbur to finish his sentence. *His eyes are red,* Wilbur noted distantly, even as he struggled to remember anything else. He could not recall falling asleep, or waking up, or walking down to meet his new tutor for their first lesson.

“Well?” Technoblade prodded.

Wilbur shook his head. “Nothing, nothing. What are we, um, learning today?”

Technoblade cocked his head to the side, unimpressed. His hair had been pulled into a braid so tight that it hurt Wilbur’s scalp by proxy. “Philza said you were crap at fencing.”

Wilbur grimaced as he walked over to the chest, kneeling to filter through its contents. “That’s one way of saying it.” He picked up one of the swords, and turned to Technoblade, who’d apparently brought his own weapon: a wicked-looking broadsword with a ruby-encrusted hilt. “I’m a bit better at long-ranged weapons, if you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t,” Technoblade snorted. “Get into position.”

Wilbur did.

“That’s not correct.”

Wilbur sighed. “I *told* you—”

Technoblade walked closer to Wilbur until they were eye-to-eye. Wilbur was a few inches taller than him, he realized, at least until Technoblade knocked him flat on his back with a sudden blow to the stomach. The air left Wilbur’s lungs in a rush. He blinked lazily up at the ceiling for a moment, before the indignation set in.

He leaned himself against his elbows and glared at his tutor, who was looking more and more unimpressed.

“You could have withstood that if you were in the correct position,” Technoblade drawled.

“You could’ve warned me!” Wilbur spat, clambering to his feet.

"*Oh,* is that how a fight goes, Your Highness?" Technoblade mocked. "Alright, then, if it pleases you, Your Princeliness, I shall be striking your shoulder with the flat of my blade next."

"What?"

Quicker than a breath, Technoblade did just that. Wilbur landed on his side, his own weapon flying out of his hands.

Technoblade laughed with no real warmth. "I even warned you that time and I *still* knocked you over. Gods, you're pathetic."

Wilbur wanted to say, *I'm calling my father,* but caught himself before he could give that ammunition to the smug bastard. Instead, he got shakily to his feet, his entire body smarting from the impact with the floor, and picked his rapier up from the ground.

He got into position again. Technoblade raised one eyebrow.

"This would go faster if you told me what's wrong with it," Wilbur grumbled.

"This would go even faster if you didn't fumble your basics," Technoblade retorted.

"Shut up."

"Strong demands from a boy who can't even get his left foot placed properly."

Wilbur considered his words. He moved his left foot inch by inch, watching Technoblade until the man finally gave a curt nod. Wilbur sighed.

"See? That wasn't—*oh my gods*." Wilbur barely had time to throw up his rapier before Technoblade crashed his sword against it. Steel hissed. Wilbur's knees buckled under Technoblade's surprising strength—it felt like having an entire house collapse on him, and if he fell, he'd be crushed.

Technoblade fell back, leaving Wilbur with his heart hammering in his chest.

"What was that?!" Wilbur demanded. "You could have killed me that time!"

"I could have killed you multiple times since you first walked in here." Technoblade gestured for him to get into position. *Again, again, again.* "Never let your guard down, Your Highness. Always assume the enemy is planning to strike."

"What even is the point of this?" Wilbur asked. "The kingdom has been at peace for gods know how long. I don't need to risk my neck for a skill that doesn't even matter."

Technoblade considered him for a long moment, the silence between them only broken by the beginnings of birdsong as the rest of the world finally began to wake.

"And what will you do when it does matter?" Technoblade asked.

“It never will—”

“But let’s say it will,” Technoblade interrupted, taking a step towards Wilbur, his red eyes never once leaving the prince’s face. “Let’s say, *hypothetically*, that a foreign army attacks at this very moment. Your father isn’t here to help. Nobody’s here to help. It’s just you. Do you just stand there and get torn apart by the mob? Will you run like a coward and leave your kingdom to the wolves?”

Wilbur flinched. “That’s not…”

“Or not even an army. Consider, if you will, just one very smart, very *angry* person, and they’ve got your brother.” Technoblade smirked at whatever expression was on Wilbur’s face. “That’s all it takes, you know, to kill a kingdom—a single person who knows your weak spots. So what you need to do is get rid of them. The weak spots, I mean. This kingdom is only impenetrable because Philza has long ago gotten rid of every vulnerability. So what happens when *you* take the throne?”

“That’s not true,” Wilbur said quietly, standing in the downpour of Technoblade’s words. “My father—he does have vulnerabilities. He has Mother. Tommy.” *Me.*

“But he has the power to protect them,” Technoblade replied. “And you don’t. That’s the difference.”

The sun had climbed higher into the sky, painting everything in gold. Through the gaps in the ivy, the warm light shone on Wilbur’s skin, warming him from the inside out. He imagined the light seeping into his skin, into his bones, into the cracks of his soul until he could be made whole again—a boy of sunlight, like Tommy. He wanted the sun to burn away the tiredness, the sadness, the thoughts. He wanted the sun to burn Technoblade, too, with his harsh words made harsher by their truth.

Wilbur took a shaky breath, letting the fresh air in and trapping it in his lungs for as long as he could. Then he let it out.

He glared at Technoblade, then got into position.

“Fine,” he spat. “Do your worst.”

“Wilby, you look like trash,” Tommy said brightly over a plate of eggs.

“Tommy,” Father scolded.

“No, no,” Technoblade mumbled through a mouthful of meat. “The boy is right, Phil, *Wilby* does look like trash.”

Wilbur groaned at their remarks—and then groaned some more when the movement made his ribs feel like they were cracking apart. Bruises were already starting to form up and down his arms from the various times Technoblade had knocked him to the floor. He couldn’t even

reach for his utensils without pain lacing up his side, and so his breakfast remained tantalizingly out of reach right in front of him.

Tommy's initial annoyance at sleeping in and "missing the Blade in action" was only matched by his absolute delight at seeing his older brother so battered, and then exceeded by his excitement when Father invited Technoblade for breakfast to recount how terribly Wilbur had performed. It was to track his progress, or some sort of excuse like that, though Wilbur guessed Father just wanted to stop Technoblade from disappearing wherever he goes off to—like last night.

"Did he cry?" Tommy demanded, practically vibrating off his chair.

Technoblade, seated next to him, cut another piece of meat and chewed ponderously on it before answering, "Almost."

"Wicked," Tommy breathed.

Father glanced at Wilbur worriedly, taking in his bruises. "Techno, maybe next time, you can go easy a bit?"

"No," Wilbur said hurriedly, wincing when his sore limbs protested. "*No*. I told him to not hold back."

Father raised an eyebrow. "I doubt that."

"No, really, I need this, Father," Wilbur insisted. His legs felt like lead and some of his bones were definitely misplaced, but by the end of their five-hour session, he'd learned where to strike to kill and where to strike to incapacitate, how to block attacks as much as deal them, and how to fight off stronger opponents—"Which, for you, would be all of them," Technoblade had said as he righted Wilbur's grip on his rapier.

"Let the boy bruise a little, Phil," Technoblade said now, downing a glass of wine. "It's good practice. Good distraction, too."

Distraction?

Wilbur looked to his father, but he was busy trying to force a bowl of vegetables on Tommy. When he looked again, Wilbur found himself meeting eyes with Technoblade.

The other boy was considering him at length. Wilbur had caught sight of that expression multiple times in the past five hours. Like Technoblade was *inspecting* him—less with the scrutiny of a teacher, and more with the intense focus of a surgeon trying not to make the wrong cut.

"What?" Wilbur finally asked. "Do I have something on my face?"

"Yes. Defeat."

Wilbur resisted the urge to stick his tongue out, like Tommy undoubtedly would have done. "You are a very rude guest."

“You are a very weak prince.”

“I don’t see what my physical prowess—”

“Or lack thereof,” Technoblade inserted.

“—has to do with you being such a pissy bastard,” Wilbur finished hotly.

“Wilbur!” Father said, swiveling to face his oldest son. “Cursing? In front of your baby brother? I taught you better manners than that.”

“I am not a *baby,*” Tommy protested. “And what does piss—”

“I think that’s my cue to go,” Technoblade interrupted suddenly, rising from his seat.

“To where?” Father asked.

“None of your business, actually,” Technoblade replied, not flippantly or arrogantly, just stating a fact.

Father’s grip tightened infinitesimally on his spoon. “I think it *is* my business, if you’re living in my castle.”

Technoblade shrugged. “Try and stop me, then.”

They stared each other down—the king and his visitor. Red eyes on blue. A moment passed. Then another. Father did not move.

“That’s what I thought,” Technoblade scoffed, and then disappeared in a whirl of fur and scarlet silk.

Wilbur glanced at Father, trying to gauge his reaction. Father had never seemed truly old, but in that moment, it felt like Wilbur was watching him age a thousand years per second.

“Who is he, really?” Wilbur asked, before he could lose the nerve.

Father blinked slowly, as if coming out of a dream. “An old friend, I told you.”

“From when? He can’t be that old of a friend—he’s just a teenager. When did you meet him?” Wilbur repeated.

Father pursed and unpursed his lips like he was trying to swallow something rancid. “Why does it matter, Wilbur?”

“Because you look at him like you look at me, and I don’t know what to make of that.”

Father’s gaze pinned Wilbur to his seat, even more than the soreness of his body did. Even Tommy had fallen quiet, sensing –in the way that younger siblings do—that his brother was in the sort of trouble that required absolute silence.

“And how do I look at you, Wil?” Father asked.

Like I disappoint you. Like I did something to hurt you and you're sad I can't remember what.

"It doesn't matter." Wilbur mustered what was left of his strength and rose from his seat. "My other non-violent tutors are waiting. If you'll excuse me, Father. Tommy."

Tommy stared back at him, wide-eyed.

Father only sighed. "It's a long story, Wilbur," he said, with infinite patience. Wilbur would have preferred he screamed. "And not one you're ready to hear. Either of you," he added, giving Tommy a reassuring smile. "But one day, I'll—"

"Sure." Wilbur turned from them, and began to walk away. "*One day*. Whenever that is."

He expected a rebuttal. Or perhaps *wanted* one.

But, as always, there was nothing left to say.

They carried on like that for months more.

Every morning, Wilbur would pull himself out of bed and head down to the gardens, where Technoblade would always be waiting—even after the times he threatened to leave, and the times that it looked like he was truly going to. Technoblade would walk Wilbur through his stances and correct them by demonstrating how exactly it could be turned against him. The tutor was never fully pleased, but eventually they made their way through the weapons in the chest and had to request for more to practice with: spears and knives and axes. They never spoke beyond the usual instructions, and Wilbur never complained again when—a few weeks in—he almost, *almost*, disarmed Technoblade during a sparring session with the rapier, before Technoblade inevitably knocked him over again.

"I almost got you!" Wilbur had grinned, even as he picked himself up from the floor.

"*Almost* won't cut it on the battlefield, princeling," Technoblade had said with a roll of his eyes. "And I was going easy on you."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night."

Technoblade snorted. "I don't sleep."

Wilbur was still debating whether he'd been joking or not.

Eventually, Tommy's jealousy outweighed his drowsiness, and he begun to follow Wilbur to the training pavilion, yawning all the way, with his blanket wrapped around his shoulders and trailing in the dewy grass. He'd sit on the floor, shouting unhelpful advice and laughing at his brother's failures.

"Technoblade," the younger prince had said at one point. "Will you train me alongside Wilbur?"

Technoblade had eyed Tommy and his blanket, looking so serious that Wilbur thought he might actually be sizing his little brother up. “Well, you do have similar skill levels—”

“Hey.” Wilbur tossed a stray pebble at Technoblade’s head. It bounced harmlessly off his braided hair.

“I want to be strong like you,” Tommy said, uncharacteristically solemn as he stared up at the older boys. “And like dad.” He raised his gangly arms up to them. “Look at these, Technoblade. They’re pulsing with potential.”

Technoblade arched an eyebrow at him, an amused smile tugging at his lips. “Little prince, you are years away yet from needing to learn anything. Your brother’s training so you don’t have to. Understood?”

Tommy pouted, but nodded. Wilbur stared at him, feeling as if he’d just witnessed the taming of a wild beast. He glanced at Technoblade, who had walked over to one corner of the pavilion to stretch.

“How’d you get Tommy to not kick and scream like he does when he doesn’t get what he wants from *me*?” Wilbur called out.

“I don’t kick and *scream*,” Tommy huffed. “I let out a manly *whine*.”

“It’s probably because he respects me and not you,” Technoblade replied curtly.

Wilbur whirled on his brother. “Is that true?” he demanded, with faux hurt.

Tommy shrugged. “I’d respect you more if you weren’t reading all the time.”

“I’m not reading *now*,” Wilbur said, at the same time Technoblade called, “I know how to read, too, just to put it out there.”

Afterwards, they would eat breakfast together. Sometimes, it would just be Wilbur, Technoblade and Tommy, going over the practice session—Technoblade, with his dry corrections and Tommy with his enthusiastic, albeit often inaccurate, input. But often Father would join them, and Wilbur would be lying if he said he didn’t feel a bit validated whenever Technoblade praised—or as close as the man could get to praise—his improvements in front of his father.

Mother had taken to waking late, and took her breakfast in her room. They’d visit her there, Wilbur and Tommy, but she’d often be too tired to speak at all. Tommy tried to introduce Technoblade to her once, but she was already asleep again by the time they arrived at her bedchambers.

“Probably for the best,” Technoblade had said. “I’ve been told I don’t make great first impressions with mothers, mostly because I met them after I’d just slaughtered their children.”

“Please reserve the morbid jokes for after Tommy’s gone to bed, Technoblade,” Wilbur said.

“What does *slaughtered* mean?” Tommy asked.

“I tickled them,” Technoblade said.

“Oh.”

“To death.”

“Oh.”

Wilbur had hit Technoblade on the shoulder, but he was laughing, too.

Three months in, Technoblade finally relented to letting Wilbur practice long-ranged weapons, which turned out not to be his forte after all. The session had to stop after Wilbur almost took Tommy’s eyes out with an arrow. Tommy was inconsolable.

“Please don’t tell Father,” Wilbur begged as he kneeled in front of his wailing brother, wiping Tommy’s cheeks as fast as the tears came. “It was an accident, Tommy.”

Technoblade was cackling, leaning against one of the pavilion’s sculpted pillars. “You should see your face!” he managed to wheeze out between his guffaws. “Oh, gods, this is too hilarious—”

Wilbur turned to glare at him. “You *do* know, if he tells Father, that it means *you’re* in trouble, too?”

Technoblade snorted. “I’m not scared of your father.”

There it was again. The arrogant dismissal, as if Father were nothing to him. Wilbur clenched his jaw to keep the barbed remarks from spilling.

Tommy was still wailing, his tiny face turning red from the effort.

“Okay,” Technoblade said after a long moment. “That’s getting annoying now. Stop.”

Tommy didn’t.

“Tommy, *stop*,” Technoblade said more loudly.

Tommy stopped, only to wipe his nose on his sleeve, hiccup, and then wail again.

“What’s wrong with him? That usually works,” Technoblade grumbled, stalking closer to them with the caution of a hunter approaching a wild animal.

“Welcome to the world of big brotherhood,” Wilbur replied bitterly, still wiping gently at Tommy’s face. “We hope you enjoy your stay, but most likely you will suffer.”

Technoblade came to kneel beside Wilbur.

“Tommy,” Technoblade demanded. “That is very irritating, what you are doing. Please quieten down.”

Tommy responded by crying louder.

“Oh, for the love of—What will it take for you to shut up? I’ll do anything at this point.”

The crying stopped immediately.

“Oh, gods.” Wilbur put his face in his hands. “You’re not supposed to say that, Techno. You’re *never supposed to say that!”*

“What? What?” Technoblade demanded, panic seeping into his voice for the first time since Wilbur met him. “What did I do? *What the hell did I do?”*

Tommy sniffled. “You said you’ll do… anything?”

Realization dawned on Technoblade’s face. “Well, not *anything*, per se…”

Tommy’s eyes began to water once more.

“Okay, okay, okay.” Technoblade ran his hands across his face in frustration. “*Fine.* One thing, and you’ll shut up forever.”

“I want to braid your hair,” Tommy said at once.

Technoblade blinked. “What?”

“What?” Wilbur echoed. “You once got me to let you ride me like a pony across the castle, and you ask him to let you *braid his hair?*”

Tommy nodded with all the solemnity of a judge announcing someone’s death sentence. Wilbur and Technoblade exchanged glances—Technoblade, one of bewilderment, and Wilbur, one of utmost betrayal.

That was how they found themselves wasting the morning away, sitting together on the damp grass. Wilbur leaned back on his hands and raised his face to the sun, letting the light settle against his skin. He could hear Tommy scurrying around, gathering flowers, as the spring breeze blew through the garden.

For a moment, all Wilbur could feel was a sudden, all-consuming affection—not for anything in particular. For *everything*. For the brilliant spinning wheel in the sky turning everything into burnished gold. For the soft dirt beneath his hands. For the air in his lungs and the pollen on his tongue. For the distant sound of his brother’s footsteps. For the boy sitting beside him that, against all odds, Wilbur found he might actually like beyond mere tolerance. For the levity that had started to chase away the more exhausting thoughts.

He cracked one eye open and found Technoblade staring at him again, with that all-too-serious look.

“What?” Wilbur asked. “Can’t a man be glad that he’s not getting tossed around for one morning?”

Technoblade scoffed. “Don’t discredit my teaching skills like that. You’ve been getting tossed around less and less these days.”

“Was that meant to be a compliment?”

“None of my compliments will ever be meant. They will be passive-aggressive, at best. Openly hostile, at worst.”

“Oh, of course, we have to pry positive affirmation from your cold dead hands, is that it?”

“Only way you’ll earn it,” Technoblade confirmed.

They went silent as another breeze blew past them, blowing Technoblade’s unbound hair across his face.

Then, before Wilbur could think twice about it, he said, “What did you mean, before, when you told Father our tutoring sessions were a distraction? A distraction from what?”

Technoblade’s expression darkened for a fraction of a second before he schooled it into careful neutrality. He shrugged nonchalantly. “Well, growing boy like you, you’re meant to have hobbies beyond… whatever you were doing before.”

“I *read*,” Wilbur said. “And played music. That was a sufficient distraction, I think.”

“Not according to Philza.”

“Why do you talk like that, by the way?” Wilbur shifted to look Technoblade squarely in the eyes. “You call the king *Philza*, which I can excuse because you’re… well, *you*. But Father also calls you an old friend, and I’ve asked Mother—because Father tells Mother everything—but she never heard of you before. And you all these things about weapons and warfare. Far too much.”

“You’re from a kingdom that has enjoyed peace for decades, princeling,” Technoblade said, with a world’s worth of exhaustion in his voice. “Beyond those walls, it’s different. Knowing war young is not entirely uncommon. Kids just grow faster out there. They have to.”

Wilbur took fistfuls of grass and threw it at Technoblade’s face. Technoblade, unamused, simply blew the grass from his face.

“Very mature, Your Highness,” Technoblade said dryly.

“You were being all sad again,” Wilbur muttered, pulling his knees up to his chin. He looked up just as Tommy came toddling towards them, his arms a burst of color—yellow alstroemerias, white daisies, purple malvas, and freesias the color of Technoblade’s hair.

“Oh, gods,” Technoblade groaned as Tommy dumped his collection before them proudly.

Tommy grinned as he kneeled behind Technoblade. “Dad used to braid Mama’s hair all the time, before she got tired. He taught me how.”

Technoblade turned towards Wilbur. “Should I be worried?”

“Very,” Wilbur said sagely. “At least he doesn’t have scissors this time,” he added, recalling a particularly incensed butler who’d foolishly offered himself to be Tommy’s training dummy last year, and ended up with less hair than he bargained for.

Tommy turned Technoblade’s head away from Wilbur. “Hold still!” he ordered, beginning to take handfuls of Technoblade’s hair, tugging them into place.

“Ow!” Technoblade said after a particularly harsh pull.

“Sorry,” Tommy said cheerfully, and began to braid in earnest.

Wilbur sat back and watched them in silence, his ferocious tutor and his even more ferocious younger brother. The sunlight seemed to catch in the tangles of Tommy’s hair, making it shine like a golden halo. Wilbur had never seen anyone as focused as Tommy was in that moment, working through Technoblade’s hair, pausing only to debate on what flowers should go where. And Technoblade, for his part, did not move at all, or let out so much as a word of complaint, even when Tommy took time to educate them all on what exactly each flower meant.

I could write a song about this, Wilbur mused, and then marveled at the thought. It was as if a block he’d been carrying for years lifted, and his art was now inches away from his hands, if only he’d brought his guitar with him today.

Tomorrow, he promised himself. *I’ll write our song tomorrow.*

“There,” Tommy said at last, tying the end of the braid off with the red ribbon Technoblade often used himself.

Wilbur blinked in surprise. “Tommy, that’s… actually good. Really good.”

Technoblade reached back and ran his hands delicately over the elegant braid and the flowers woven into it. He hummed appreciatively, then caught himself before he could fully smile. Because he was still Technoblade, after all.

“Decent,” was his only comment.

“I’m not done yet!” Tommy said, and produced one more flower—a single yellow rose. “This one’s my favorite,” he added as he gently tucked the flower behind Technoblade’s ear, the one that had the emerald earring that Wilbur had found so familiar, “because it means friendship.”

Technoblade stiffened. His mouth opened and closed, like he was trying to breathe but forgot how, before he finally said, “Are we friends, then?”

Tommy stood and brushed grass from his pants. “Well, obviously.”

“Obviously?”

“Oh, hey!” The sudden excitement in Tommy’s tone caught both Technoblade and Wilbur’s attention. He began waving to someone in the distance, his smile as bright as life itself. “It’s Dad and Mama!”

Mother? Wilbur was on his feet at once, his heart hammering in his chest like a moth set aflame. Sure enough, there was Mother, out in the sun once more, for the first time in over a year. Wilbur took in a shaky inhale, not daring to breathe again, as if the image before him would dissipate like smoke: Mother, smiling at them, as she walked arm-in-arm with Father through the garden.

Tommy ran as fast as he tiny legs could carry him and launched himself into their mother’s waiting arms. Wilbur couldn’t ignore the brief flash of pain that flickered over his mother’s features as she gathered Tommy into hug, but neither could he help his relief at seeing her walk at all.

“Well?” Technoblade said from behind him. “Go ahead, then.”

Wilbur turned to his tutor and, before Technoblade could protest, took him by the wrist and dragged him over to where Mother and Father were waiting.

Father’s smile was gentle and welcoming, and Wilbur could almost forgive the sadness that remained in his eyes, like a ghost hovering at the edges of a celebration.

“You must be Technoblade,” Mother said happily, carrying Tommy in her arms as she addressed the tutor. “I do apologize that it has taken us this long to be acquainted, though Phil has been telling me of all you have done for our Wilby.”

Wilbur expected Technoblade’s usual icy jabs, and was quite surprised when he bowed his head in what could pass as deference to an untrained eye.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Majesty. Your sons have told me much about you.”

Mother gave Technoblade a conspiratorial grin as she asked, “And I trust all they’ve said is in my favor, yes? Nothing about how sharp my tongue can be when I’m cranky?”

“Oh, I assure you, they’ve painted you as nothing less than perfect.” Technoblade glanced at Father. “Although Philza might had said a thing or two about your rigid standards for tea.”

Father chuckled. He pressed closer to Mother and Tommy, keeping an arm around Mother’s waist. As if to steady her. As if to hold her together, just a little bit longer. “I told you that in confidence, Techno.”

“Technoblade,” Mother repeated. “That’s a rather odd name.”

“I said the same thing!” Tommy added brightly, always eager to be part of the adults’ conversation.

Technoblade only shrugged, once again demonstrating a level of civility that Wilbur would never have expected of the same man that regularly combatted the king’s orders. “I would

feel too much like a traitor if I abandoned it now, after all these years with it. It is my one constant companion, more loyal than most."

"Loyalty *is* a rather precious gift." Mother sighed softly. She transferred Tommy to one arm and reached out with the other, until she was cupping Technoblade's cheek. "I do hope, my boy," she continued, her voice as tranquil as a still lake, "that you will find the people you can trust more than your own name. You deserve that, and more, for all you have done for my family."

Technoblade blinked slowly at her, for once struck speechless.

Tommy giggled. "Techno is *blushing*."

"I am not," Technoblade spat hotly.

"Yes, you are," Tommy cooed, leaning back into Mother's arms, safe in the belief that she would never drop him. "You *so* are—"

"Tommy, don't torture the poor child," Mother said, even as she giggled herself.

"Wil?" Father reached out and ruffled Wilbur's hair playfully. "You look a hundred miles away."

Wilbur exhaled slowly. "I'm just… remembering."

"Remembering what?"

This. Mother's soft smile. Tommy's cheery laugh. Technoblade's half-hearted protests. Father's hand on his head. *Everything.*

"Nothing," Wilbur said. "Forget I said anything." He smiled at his father, for once without reservation. He had never felt so light. He was almost a son again. "Would you like to watch Techno and I spar?"

Father's expression softened. "Of course. I would be delighted to."

It was the last good day.

The knock came at midnight. It dragged Wilbur from the comfort of a dreamless sleep.

"Wilbur!" Technoblade's voice. Urgent. Almost angry. *"Wilbur! Open the door!"*

Wilbur threw off his covers and bolted for the door. Technoblade stood outside his bedchambers, his red eyes blazing in the dark.

He said the three words that would come to haunt Wilbur until the day he died.

"It's your mother."

They ran through the castle, Wilbur, for the first time, outpacing his tutor. They arrived at the long hallway that led to his parents' bedchambers, already choked with servants.

"Move!" Technoblade demanded, his voice booming over the din. *"Move, or I will make you."*

The servants rushed to the sides, clearing a path for Wilbur and Technoblade. Wilbur couldn't register any of their faces, or their voices.

All there was was silence, until the worst sound Wilbur had ever heard. An anguished cry that turned Wilbur's blood cold. *Tommy. Tommy's here.*

He burst into the room and found his brother curled into a ball by the foot of the bed. The bed where his mother laid. Sleeping. No. Not sleeping.

Not sleeping. Not sleeping. Not sleeping—

Wilbur could not breathe. Tommy was still crying, crying for their mother. For their father.

Father. Wilbur's eyes scanned the room, but there was no trace of the king. No trace of the man who had just lost his wife.

"Tommy." Technoblade pushed past Wilbur and into the room. Wilbur could see him, could see it all, but it felt like watching someone else's life happen from leagues under the sea. Everything happened too slowly, too distantly. Technoblade kneeling by his brother, prying him off the cold floor. Tommy wrapping his arms around Technoblade's neck, burying his head into his shoulder and screaming.

Screaming. *So loud. So loud. Too loud.*

Technoblade, turning towards Wilbur, handing him something, pressing it into Wilbur's cold fingers.

Wilbur looked down at his hands. It was a letter. Crumpled. Tear-stained—by his own tears, he realized belatedly.

Techno, it said. *Tell the boys I'm sorry. And tell Wilbur he will be a better king than I ever was.*

The world fell out from under Wilbur's feet, leaving him suspended in the air. Freefalling, with no true end.

"No," he thought, or maybe said, or maybe screamed, "no, no, no, this wasn't how it's supposed to go—"

Oh, said the voices, *but this already happened before.*

Wilbur blinked. And blinked again.

"Father's… gone?" he said, not taking his eyes off from the letter. "He left?"

“Wilbur.” Technoblade’s voice, rising above Tommy’s agonized sobbing. Was that worry in the other boy’s voice? “I found the letter slipped under my door, and by the time I came here, it was too late. Your mother, she was…”

“Also gone?” The letter began to shake violently. Or, not the letter—Wilbur’s hands. “But she was… she was just here. This morning, she watched us spar. She was smiling. She was… she was *alive*. Technoblade—*Techno*—”

This was inevitable.

Wilbur clamped his hands over his ears. “Shut up!”

It was meant to be.

“Go away!” Wilbur fell to his knees, pressing his hands tighter and tighter to block out the sound. “I thought I’d gotten rid of you. You said you were going to leave me alone!”

A sudden pain laced up Wilbur’s arm, and he opened his eyes to find Technoblade kneeling in front of him, his hand an iron grip around Wilbur’s wrist. Tommy was gone—*when did that happen?*—and the silence he left behind was almost as bad as the screaming.

“Come back to me, Wilbur,” Technoblade ordered. “Who do you hear?”

“You,” Wilbur said haltingly.

He was not for this act. Not for this stage.

“And the voices.”

Technoblade nodded, easing his grip on Wilbur’s wrist. “I can help you.”

No one can.

Wilbur squeezed his eyes shut, but all he could see was mother’s still form. Father’s letter.

“Wilbur, look at me.”

Wilbur shook his head. “I can’t.”

“Then listen to me. I can help you,” Technoblade repeated firmly, “because I have voices, too.”

Wilbur lungs began to ache with the quickness of his breaths. “You do?” He sounded like a child, seeking comfort from a distant figure. But there was too much pain to make room for shame.

“I do,” Technoblade said. “So breathe with me, until they go away, and we can figure out the next step together.”

That was all they did. They breathed. In, and out, and in again. Technoblade's hand on his wrist and the sickly-sweet smell of rotting flowers keeping him rooted to the ground. To the universe.

In, and out, and in again.

And in between one breath and the next, Wilbur finally remembered where he'd heard the name Technoblade before.

"Father—he…" Wilbur swallowed down a sob. "He told me a story once, when I was young. The first time the voices ever… talked to me. He told me a story about an immortal god, who was doomed to hear voices in his head forever. A blood god. *Technoblade*. You're a god?"

"Don't worry about that now." His voice was distant, but kind. "It doesn't matter."

"But I don't remember how the story ended." Exhaustion was a heavy blanket, weighing him down until he was leaning on Technoblade's shoulder. His throat felt raw, like he'd eaten broken glass.

This story has no end, the voices said, but they sounded distant, too.

"Tell me how the story ends," Wilbur begged, even as he felt the last of his consciousness slowly fracture into nothingness. "Tell me you'll still be here when I close the book."

"Wilbur, I—" Technoblade mumbled something too low to hear, and then he said, "Okay. I'll be here."

Wilbur wanted to say more, or perhaps he didn't.

Outside, somewhere far away, bells began to toll, chiming his mother's death ballad. Heralding his ascension.

Tell the boys I'm sorry. His father's voice this time, as quiet as the rest.

In between one breath and the next, Wilbur was king. In between one breath and the next, he was asleep.

Chapter End Notes

I finished this at 1AM lmao so forgive any errors please. i am begging.
I tried to make Wilbur's chapters sound as distinct as possible from techno's - let me know how i did, or if they sound too similar.
if anyone's wondering, Wilbur is 15-ish in this chapter; tommy is 6-ish.

also follow me on twitter @thcscus so we can cry over sbi together.
comments and kudos are always appreciated <3

when the cold wind rolls in from the north (what am i to do)

Chapter Summary

> “No,” Tommy began, rethinking his words even as he was saying them, “being king has nothing to do with it. I guess I mean it was different before… before he started choosing being king over being my big brother.”
> “Oh, Tommy.” The sadness in Techno’s voice made Tommy’s eyes snap open. “You think he has a choice?”
>
> //
>
> Or, hypocrisy, happiness and the heaviness of certain secrets

Chapter Notes

> Chapter's trigger warnings are as follows:
> -
> -
> -
> -
> -
> panic attacks

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tommy knew a thing or two about secrets.

He was five years old when he first heard the word, whispered from father to son.

“Let’s keep this a secret, alright, Wil?” Dad had said in the gentle hush of midnight, unaware that Tommy was right outside the library door, hanging on to every word. Even then, Tommy must have known Wilbur was special, if Dad was speaking to him like that: not like he was an annoying child, but like they were equals, bearing the same burdens and battle scars.

“But what if they never go away?” Wilbur had whispered back. Tommy had never heard his older brother so frightened.

Tommy walked away before he could hear the rest of the conversation he was obviously not privy to. Looking back, perhaps some part of him wanted to preserve his gilded image of his older brother—like a dead fossil crystallized in amber. Because older brothers were never

scared. Older brothers never bled. Older brothers never cowered. Older brothers were immortal. He would hold on to that belief until it was too late.

He was six years old when he got a secret to keep of his own, and truly understood its burden.

A year later, and his brother is crowned.

Tommy stood proudly in the crowd as Wilbur kneeled before a man in white robes. The sunlight from the windows caught in the jewels of the crown held over Wilbur's head—a crown that was once their father's, but no longer. Wilbur recited oaths of protection and generosity, goodness and fairness, righteous justice and unwavering fealty to the kingdom, and the robed man proclaimed him King Wilbur, Protector of the Realm, Ruler of the Kingdom. *Long may he reign.* Tommy had cheered the loudest, enough to shake the rafters above, and when Wilbur smiled, he knew it was just for him.

Two years later, on the cusp of his tenth birthday, Tommy asked Technoblade the same question he'd been asking since they met. *Will you train me?* This time, Technoblade said yes.

Time unfurled like unbound parchment, rolling off into the distance without Tommy's notice. They grew together, him and his king brother. Taller and broader, stronger and smarter—more Wilbur for the latter, if Tommy were to be honest. Wilbur's duties took him from Tommy more often than not, but that was alright, too, because Tommy had Techno. They would spar and talk until Techno was inevitably called back to the king's side, but by then Tommy was appeased. The days he was alone were the worst, but mostly indistinguishable in their monotonous quiet.

On one of those days, he found himself drifting aimlessly through the castle. Halfway down a vaguely familiar hallway, he heard something that had been sorely missed since his mother's death. Music.

He followed the sound to a door that was slightly ajar. Tommy held his breath as he looked through the crack, and then lost his breath altogether when he found the source of the mournful melody: Wilbur, tiredness etched into the slope of his shoulders and the skin under his eyes, strumming his guitar, cursing as he missed a note or two, but still continuing, still playing, still soldiering on. And with him was Technoblade on a sweetly-keening violin, his scarred hands moving gently over the strings, his bow arm moving fluidly through the air. Both of them had their eyes closed, so completely lost to their own music, and Tommy knew—deep in his gut—that this was a world he could never breach. And so he closed the door and retreated to his silence.

At fifteen years old, Tommy was the oldest he'd ever been, but he never felt so young.

Wilbur's official chambers were not meant for those outside of his council, but Tommy had never been one for rules. The guard outside the carved double doors (truly pretentious, in Tommy's correct opinion) merely sighed at the sight of Tommy coming down the hallway, and shuffled to the side to let him pass.

“His Majesty has a lot of paperwork to do,” the guard said, trying—and failing—to be stern.

“If so, then His Majesty would certainly welcome my esteemed company,” Tommy replied, giving the guard a grin and a salute as he pushed his way into the king’s offices.

Beyond the door was a large, sparsely-decorated room. There used to be paintings on the walls of past kings—their forefathers with gold hair and brilliant-blue eyes—but the first thing Wilbur had done as king was take them all down. Tommy remembered sitting on the floor of the offices, staring up as Wilbur climbed a ladder, rolled his sleeves up to his elbow and began ripping the paintings from their hooks. There had been such violence in his movements, as if the task was the very bane of his existence. Once it was done, Wilbur stood in the center of his devastation, taking in the bare walls, and nodded once to himself, pleased. Tommy still didn’t know if Wilbur even noticed he was there, too.

The only paintings on the walls now were the landscapes Mama used to make. Tommy’s favorite was the one of a mountain range shrouded in blue mist, because he could see in the corner where Mama had given him the brush for a few seconds—three errant brushstrokes in an otherwise perfect painting that stood as a reminder that, once upon a time, Tommy had existed in the same universe as his mother.

Bookshelves stood against one wall, with the other two set with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the gardens outside. At the center of all things was a desk, and a king.

Wilbur sat scribbling away at a roll of parchment. His crown lay discarded beside his inkpot and a cup of cold tea.

“What’re you doing?” Tommy asked, closing the door behind him.

Wilbur didn’t reply. He gave no indication of even hearing him.

Tommy rolled his eyes and produced two apples from his pockets. He made his way over to the desk, moved over a stack of heavy, important-looking books and hauled himself up to a sitting position, his legs dangling over the edge.

“You’ve been here all day, you know,” Tommy said idly, balancing one of the apples on the tip of his finger. “Missed breakfast and lunch.”

Wilbur only grunted in response.

“Kingdom’s on fire,” Tommy continued. “Rioting in the streets. The guards are staging a coup. Techno is leading them.”

“Sure, Tommy,” Wilbur said noncommittally, reaching to dip his quill into the inkpot.

Tommy casually moved the inkpot out of his reach. Wilbur glared up at him, finally acknowledging him, albeit with annoyance.

“What do you want, Tommy?” Wilbur asked, irritable.

Tommy took one of the apples and planted it squarely in front of his brother. “Starvation’s a pretty shit way to go,” Tommy said. “Find a less dumb way to die.”

Wilbur stared down at the fruit as if he had never seen one before. “I’m not hungry,” he said, at the exact moment his stomach started to growl.

Tommy snorted. “How embarrassing for you.”

“Shut *up*.” But Wilbur was putting down his quill and reaching for the apple. Tommy bit into his own to hide his self-satisfied smile.

Tommy leaned over to catch a glimpse at what Wilbur was writing. His brother’s familiar looping script had already covered most of the page with words like *intentions* and *fortifications* and *conscription*.

“Conscription?” Tommy repeated around a mouthful of apple. “What does that mean?”

“Swallow before speaking,” Wilbur said mildly.

“*Swallow before speaking,*” Tommy mocked. “You sound like our old governess. So grouchy —*ack*!”

He’d inhaled too quickly; unchewed apple slid suddenly down his throat and lodged there. Tommy gasped for air, reaching blindly for something to drink. Wilbur hastily placed his teacup into Tommy’s hand, and he drank it down with gusto until his airways were clear once more. When he looked at his brother through a blur of tears, Wilbur was desperately pursing his lips in a valiant fight to keep his laughter down.

“You’re an… ass,” Tommy wheezed. “And your tea is garbage.”

Wilbur swiped a thumb across his own mouth to wipe his smile away. “Techno made that tea.”

“Oh.” Tommy looked down at the tiny teacup with curiosity; he could not imagine his hardened tutor patiently brewing tea for anyone, even Wilbur. “It’s alright, then.”

“Gods, Tommy.” Wilbur placed his elbow on his desk and rested his cheek against the heel of his hand. The look he gave Tommy was one of utmost affection, despite the obvious exhaustion etched into every inch of his face. “Will you ever grow out of your hero-worship of him?”

Tommy took another, considerably smaller bite of his apple. He chewed on the sweet pulp, thinking all the while of the pink-haired tutor that had taught him and Wilbur all they knew of survival—and not just through fighting.

Techno could have left. He *should* have left, after those long nights of Tommy waking up crying, Wilbur’s dark moods, days where both of them felt so frayed that unravelling each other felt like the only way to fix it, of frustration and anger with no other way out than screaming. But he stayed. He stayed to watch Wilbur be crowned, stayed to be his most trusted adviser, stayed and kept him together when everyone else expected the boy-king to

fall apart under the pressure. He stayed and marked Tommy's height on one of the statues in the training pavilion despite his insistence that Tommy had not grown an inch. He stayed even after Wilbur forced him to attend balls and galas, and endured each one of Tommy's jibes about the pompous suits he was made to wear.

How on earth could Tommy grow out of worshiping someone like that?

Tommy swallowed, shrugged. "Maybe if you were awesome, I'd hero-worship you, too."

Wilbur scoffed. "I'm awesome."

"Wilbur, if you have to say 'I'm awesome' to prove you're awesome, you are not awesome."

"Do you remember," Wilbur said suddenly, straightening in his seat and staring at the blood-red fruit in his hand, "when we used to pick these with Mother?"

And Dad, Tommy almost added, before catching himself. "We'd go down to the orchards with big wicker baskets," Tommy remembered. "You used to lift me up on your shoulders so I could get the ones on the higher branches."

A wistful smile tugged on Wilbur's lips. "I probably can't lift you now."

"I'm not *that* heavy—"

Wilbur shook his head. "It's not a matter of whether I could, it's a matter of whether you'd let me."

Tommy opened his mouth to retort, then quickly shut it when he realized it was true. He probably wouldn't appreciate being on Wilbur's shoulders, nor would he even need to. He'd hit his growth spurt sometime last year, incensing Techno greatly when it was clear Tommy would be taller than him if he kept up the pace. That meant he would soon be taller than Wilbur, too.

"We could just try shooting apples down with arrows," Tommy offered gently.

"I'll try not to shoot for your eye this time," Wilbur replied with a laugh.

"I don't remember much about her," Tommy admitted as he rolled his apple between his palms, as if that could somehow make her distant laughter clearer in his head. "But I remember how much she loved those apple-picking days. We would be there until midnight, if she got her way. She used to gather the apple blossoms and toss them at us just to make us laugh whenever we complained we were getting bored."

"No," Wilbur said quietly. "That was Father."

Tommy wanted to kick himself. "Oh. Well. I'm sorry, I guess, I told you I don't really remember—"

"It's alright, Tommy, there's no need to apologize." Wilbur tossed his apple high into the air and caught it gracefully with one hand. "He abandoned you, too."

They polished off the rest of their apples in silence, neither of them saying another word about the phantoms that had been hanging over them for nearly a decade. It seemed to Tommy that people were haunted by two types of ghosts: the ghosts of those who died, and those who left. It was just his luck that he had both.

When they were both done, Wilbur silently wrapped the cores in an extra sheet of parchment and placed it on the edge of his table for later disposal. As he did, Tommy's attention was drawn back to the letter Wilbur had been working on when he entered.

"You didn't answer my question," Tommy said, idly kicking his heels against Wilbur's desk. "What does *conscription* mean?"

Wilbur sighed as he took up his quill again. "You don't need to know, Tommy."

Tommy bristled at the careless dismissal. "I'm a prince of this kingdom, Wilbur. I *deserve* to know."

Wilbur quirked an eyebrow at him. "Oh, suddenly you're interested in the affairs of the realm?"

"I've always been interested."

"What's our highest-earning exported product, then?"

"Uh." Tommy scanned the table. "Apples. Tea? Parchment."

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "You are a ridiculous child." He began scribbling away at the letter once more.

"I'm not a child," Tommy murmured.

"You are. Look at yourself. You're supposed to be a prince, and yet you spend your days play-fighting with Techno, or annoying the guards, or annoying *me*. What part of your behavior *isn't* childlike?"

Wilbur's quill stopped in the middle of a sentence as his words settled over them. Tommy felt heat rise to his cheeks and hurriedly got to his feet before Wilbur could see. His gut churned at the insult, and the lingering taste of apple on his tongue turned rancid and bitter.

"Tommy—" Wilbur called, but Tommy was already making his way towards the door. "Tommy, wait."

"You're not the fucking boss of me," Tommy spat without turning, lacing his words with venomous anger.

"I *am*, actually, but that's besides the point." Tommy heard Wilbur's seat scrape against the floor, but no footsteps running after him. "Tommy! Gods. You're proving my point if you walk out that door."

“I don’t care. Screw you, Wilbur, screw you!” Tommy threw the doors open, startling the guard outside. He marched past the threshold, slapping at his cheeks as if that might somehow dissipate the shame gathering there.

He shouldn’t be this angry. All three of them—Techno, Wilbur and Tommy himself—have said worse things in the past, to and about each other, but seldom did it ever sting like this. Perhaps because it came in the wake of their father’s memory being conjured up between them. Perhaps because it had been their first proper conversation in a week. Perhaps because Wilbur was right. Wilbur was always right.

The doors slammed shut behind him, echoing through the empty hallway.

Come on, Tommy prayed, *run after me*.

But the doors stayed closed, and that was answer enough.

Tommy found Techno in the training pavilion, practicing his lunges with the silver trident Wilbur had gifted him a few years back. Technoblade took one look at the expression on Tommy’s face and tossed him a spear that had been leaning against one of the statues. Wordlessly, they took their positions in the middle of the pavilion, sizing each other up for a moment before jumping into action.

After six years under Techno’s tutelage, Tommy could hold his own against knights twice his age and size. He’d even beaten Wilbur in once, though the older sibling profusely maintained that he went easy on Tommy. But he had never beaten Techno.

Tommy was sure even Wilbur, who’d been training with Techno for longer, had never won against their tutor. In a truly bleak moment when he was thirteen, Tommy eventually realized that the man they were fighting against might not even be using his full strength.

But that didn’t matter right now. It wasn’t about winning this time.

Tommy rushed Techno with a visceral scream, a sound that came from deep within his chest. Techno deflected him easily enough, but Tommy continued the onslaught, dealing blow after teeth-shattering blow. He kept screaming through it all, screaming nonsensically, screaming at his brother, at his dad, at his kingdom, at the gods themselves. He felt as if his throat might tear itself apart.

Tommy managed to push Techno back towards one of the statues, the one that bore marks of Tommy’s height over the years. Techno grunted as Tommy shoved the butt of his spear against Techno’s chest, and then retaliated by catching its shaft in the prongs of his trident. With a single jerk of his arm, Techno ripped the spear out of Tommy’s hands. It clattered to the floor somewhere behind Tommy, but that didn’t stop him. He balled up his fists and hit indiscriminately at Techno, his knuckles finding an arm, a rib, a collarbone.

And Techno merely stood there, taking all of it. He let Tommy burn his anger away into exhaustion, without a word of protest. When Tommy collapsed to the ground, a heaving, sweaty mess, Techno silently placed his own weapon to the side and laid down beside him.

They spent half an hour just like that, staring up at the roof, listening to Tommy's harsh breathing slowly wind down. Neither of them spoke. Neither of them needed to. Silence was a language in and of itself, and Techno was the most fluent in it. And so he was the one who knew just how to break it.

"Let me guess," Techno drawled, "you and Wilbur had a fight again?"

Tommy exhaled through his nose. "Called me an annoying child," he muttered.

"He does that every day, Tommy."

"I know. It was different this time, though. He might actually have meant it."

"Ah." There was a rustle of fabric as Techno crossed his arms under his head. "Well, Wilbur's not having a very fun week, so I'd take anything he says with a grain of salt."

"I wouldn't know that," Tommy grumbled. "Neither of you tell me anything."

"You never expressed a desire to be told."

"I would appreciate being told regardless."

"Noted, then."

Another moment of silence stretched before Tommy whispered, "He didn't even run after me. He would have, before."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Techno shift so he was looking down at him, arm braced against the floor.

When Techno spoke again, his voice was patient. "Before what? Before he was king?"

Tommy sighed. He felt like his lungs had come loose in all the chaos. Everything in his chest was all too tight, all too sore. He closed his eyes against the pain, seeing his brother in the darkness: brown curls falling over his eyes as he bent over his guitar, smiling at his own music. Tommy would give anything to hear Wilbur play like that again.

"No," Tommy began, rethinking his words even as he was saying them, "being king has nothing to do with it. I guess I mean it was different before… before he started choosing being king over being my big brother."

"Oh, Tommy." The sadness in Techno's voice made Tommy's eyes snap open. "You think he has a choice?"

Tommy rolled over to finally look Techno in the eyes. Not much had changed with Techno over the years. He still kept his hair long and occasionally let Tommy braid it. His hands remained as scarred as ever, with some fresh ones now and again from adventures he told no one about, and he still wore shirts with too many ruffles for Tommy's taste. But he no longer had the emerald earring he used to wear when they were younger; Tommy couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Techno with it. In its place was the sapphire Tommy had given him

two years ago—mostly as a joke, and he'd only admit he was pleased to see Techno wearing it under the threat of death.

Techno's expression was shuttered, in that way of his whenever uncomfortable topics came up. His past. State secrets. Dad.

"Something's really happening," Tommy said, watching Techno's face carefully. "Something bad."

Techno's face remained unchanged, save for the telltale quirk at the corner of his mouth that signaled his anger. Tommy had only seen Techno truly angry a handful of times, and was not eager to add to that list.

"Things are a bit fragile right now," Techno said, "but I'm trying. I really am, and I need you to know that, Tommy."

"I do," Tommy said resolutely. "I trust you."

Because while Techno had stayed when Tommy and Wilbur were at their worst, they'd repaid him in kind. A few years into Wilbur's reign Techno had taken to studying up on statesmanship and politics and etiquette as if his very life depended on it. It was the only aspect he was lacking in, he'd said, and he needed to cover for Wilbur when push came to shove on the debate floor. And while Tommy and Wilbur couldn't understand his sudden zeal, they still knew that their tutor needed rest as much as any other human being, so they'd developed their own systems of getting Techno to eat and drink, and oftentimes had to physically pry him away from the library. Techno eventually relented to calming down after he knocked Wilbur to the ground in one of their struggles to get him to bed.

And when he sometimes disappeared in the middle of the night, or went off to gods-know-where for days on end, they'd simply welcome him back when he was ready, no questions asked—partly because the look on Techno's face after his little escapades implied that whoever asked would be thrown over a balcony.

"If things are so bad, why're you here, then?" Tommy asked. "Shouldn't you be at the king's side, Sir Right-Hand-Man?"

Techno wrinkled his nose in response.

"Oh." Laughter bubbled out of Tommy, unbidden but welcome. "I see, I see. He kicked you out, too, didn't he?"

"I suggested a solution that would end all of our problems very easily. Wilbur vetoed it. Adamantly."

Tommy grinned. "So you're throwing a tantrum."

Techno scoffed. "I am not you, Tommy." He paused. "But I suppose under the dictionary definition of a tantrum, I am currently in the middle of one."

Tommy began to laugh, that sort of laugh that ended in wheezing and hiccups. Techno watched him with a faint smile, and the two of them basked in the simplicity of it: just two boys on the floor on a hot summer day, laughter bouncing off their skin like sunlight.

“We’ll be okay, Techno,” Tommy assured him once he settled down. “I mean, it’s you and Wilbur. You’ll figure it out like you always do.”

Techno stared at Tommy for a moment before quickly looking away. “That’s enough saccharine garbage for one day, I think. Get up so I can beat you to the ground again.”

“What does *saccharine* mean?”

“It means you need to brush up on your vocabulary, Tommy.” Techno got to his feet and offered Tommy a hand.

Tommy grinned as Techno pulled him up, and though his palm was scarred, it was warm.

Tommy rolled his shoulders back until he heard the satisfying pop of his bones righting themselves. He and Techno had sparred until the sun went down, at which point a messenger had arrived to inform Techno that King Wilbur had said uncle and was crying for help (not in those words, but close enough in interpretation).

“Go,” Tommy had encouraged when Techno had hesitated on the steps leading down from the training pavilion. “At least one of us is welcomed back in His Majesty’s good graces.”

“He should be looking for a way back into yours,” Techno had replied, and was gone.

Tommy had spent the rest of the evening stabbing at a training dummy with his spear, until another servant arrived to call him to dinner which—unsurprisingly—he ate alone in an empty dining room. Afterwards, he’d made up his mind to swallow his pride and found his way back to Wilbur’s offices. The guard standing post outside was gone, which meant that Techno was still inside; after all, who needed guards with Technoblade there?

As Tommy drew nearer, voices had begun to filter in through the door, muffled but getting clearer as he approached.

“—quiet today,” someone was saying. “But that hardly means anything. I think they know something I don’t, Techno.”

Tommy held his breath as he pressed his ear against the door.

“Did you do the breathing exercises I taught you?” Techno’s soft drawl.

“Did I—of course I did. I did everything you said, I always do.” Wilbur’s fraught murmur.

“Then why won’t you let me do *this* for you?”

Do what? Tommy had leaned in as close as he dared.

“Because it won’t help,” Wilbur had said. It sounded as if this was an argument they’d had a million times before. “We don’t know *why* they’re gathering at the border yet.”

“You’ve studied history. You know nothing good ever comes from that sort of maneuver, Wilbur. Meanwhile, the longer we wait, the less prepared we’ll be when they—”

“*If* they do,” Wilbur interrupted, “we’re not entirely unprepared. I’ve sent the conscription notices.”

There was a loaded pause. “You did?” Tommy didn’t know if Techno sounded more impressed or indignant. “When?”

“This afternoon, after my little brother looked me in the eyes and I realized just how much I have to lose.”

At that point, Tommy had backed hastily from the door as if it burned him. He turned on his heels and ran, his head spinning and his heart hammering, unsure whether to laugh or to cry. Something bad *was* really happening, something that made Wilbur think he was going to lose everything. Tommy didn’t pay much attention to his history tutors (they were never as amazing as Technoblade was) but he did know that his family had maintained peace in the kingdom for decades, and that talks about borders were never joyful affairs.

Now, in the silence of his bedroom, he paced, working out the kinks in his body and trying hard to ignore the gnawing feeling that he was on the brink of something too large to comprehend.

But there was one thing he knew for certain. None of this would be happening if their father had stayed. Techno did, even when they’d only known him for a few months. What had stopped him from doing the same?

And then there was the guilt of knowing exactly what could have made him stay, what could have been done. Secrets. What terrible, heavy things.

Tommy was still wearing a path through his rug when the knock came, startling him out of his thoughts.

“Yes?” he called, suddenly getting the urge to reach for one of the decorative swords hanging from his wall.

“It’s me.”

Wilbur. Tommy relaxed. And then, jolting back, *Wilbur?*

Tommy opened his door slowly, unsure of who was waiting on the other side: the king or the brother?

But standing at the threshold, his shoulders slumped and his smile tired, was just Wilbur.

“Hello,” Wilbur said. “Can I come in?”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Techno told you to come, didn’t he?”

The smile slipped from Wilbur’s face. “Does it matter?” he asked exhaustedly.

“’Suppose not.” Tommy stood back to let Wilbur inside.

Wilbur crept in like a tourist, looking at every inch of Tommy’s room like every little thing was a priceless artifact. When had Tommy last allowed his older brother into his bedroom? Most likely around the same time Wilbur moved his things into the king’s quarters.

“I like this,” Wilbur said idly, pointing at an ancient morning star hanging next to the door. “Really ties the room together, I think.”

“Cut the crap, Wilbur,” Tommy snapped, the morning’s vehemence returning like bitter waves to the shore. “Just tell me why you’re here.”

Wilbur sighed as he threw himself down on one of the spare settees. “We need to talk, Tommy.”

“Alright.” Tommy leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, watching Wilbur suspiciously. “Talk, then.”

Wilbur crossed his legs and returned Tommy’s scrutiny tenfold; his dark eyes seemed to be made for the very purpose of staring people down. “First of all, I would like to apologize for what I said earlier. You are never an annoyance to me, Tommy. But you *are* a child.”

“Wilbur—”

Wilbur held a hand up to silence him. “Let me finish,” he said, wielding not the authority of a liege, but of a firstborn sibling. “You *are* a child. That isn’t a bad thing—you’re allowed to be what you are, and you’re young. But that’s also the reason why I thought it was best to keep things from you. In my efforts to protect you, I drove you away, and that’s the last thing I want. And you’re right, speaking with Techno did help me come to that conclusion, but we all need Techno’s help now and again, don’t we?”

Tommy scoffed, but knew he couldn’t disagree. Wilbur knew it, too.

“I don’t need to be protected, Wilbur,” Tommy said weakly.

“Then why do you always look so sad?”

Tommy’s eyes locked on Wilbur’s. “*What*?”

There was a world’s worth of pain in Wilbur’s expression. “Whenever you think no one’s watching, you look so sad, Tommy. But I see you. You joke and laugh and shout all day, but the moment you’re alone, you—you get this look on your face. Like you’re carrying some heavy weight and you’re trying to find somewhere to set it down, but there’s *nowhere*. I’ve seen that look before, Tommy, and that’s why I’m scared for you. Because Father—”

“Don’t,” Tommy croaked. “Don’t compare me to him, Wilbur. I am *nothing* like him.”

“Prove it, then.” Wilbur suddenly stood, making Tommy jerk back against the wall. “Do what he never had the guts to do, and *tell me*. Tell me what’s wrong, Tommy. Tell me what you’re carrying, and I’ll help you.”

Tommy’s chest felt tight with the pressure of the decade-old secret. His eyes instinctively scanned the room for an exit, some way out, some way to never speak of this again. He wanted nothing more than to melt into the wallpaper behind him and never see the light of day again.

Wilbur’s expression softened at Tommy’s panic, and he slowly sat back down on the settee.

“I’m sorry,” he said gently. “I didn’t mean to—” He pinched the bridge of his nose and let out a long sigh. “I’m so shit at this. Okay. *Okay*. Here. To prove to you that I can handle your secret, I’ll tell you mine.”

Tommy’s brows furrowed. “You have a million secrets, Wilbur. Maybe even more than that.”

“I know. But this is *the* secret, Tommy.”

There it was again—the feeling that he was standing on the precipice of a dark, unfathomable chasm.

“I,” said Wilbur, “hear voices.” He tapped his temple. “Right here. Voices that aren’t mine, or anyone else’s, as far as I know. We’re still trying to figure it out.”

“*We*?” Tommy breathed.

“Techno and I.”

“Ah. Of course.” Tommy leaned slightly forward, confusion and fear warring in his gut. “What do these voices say?”

“Sometimes, they’re cryptic. Vague. Talking about fate and strings. Sometimes, they just taunt me. And sometimes, it’s worse.” Wilbur took a shuddering breath. “So much worse.”

“And right now?” Tommy asked, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

“Right now,” Wilbur said quietly, “they’re telling me to kill you.”

Tommy’s breath caught in his throat. He was suddenly very aware of how many weapons—decorative or otherwise—he had on his walls. “Wilbur, you can’t—”

“I’m not going to do it, Tommy,” Wilbur said, sounding hurt that Tommy might ever think the opposite. “I would never hurt you. But the voices—they’re saying it’s inevitable. That it’s your destiny to die by my hand. That this is… that this is a story that has been told many times over, and we can’t change how it ends.”

“And how *does* it end?”

“Badly,” Wilbur whispered. His tone made it clear that whatever it was, Tommy was not prepared to hear it.

“Well you don’t—you don’t actually know what the voices are saying are real, right? Maybe it’s all nonsense and it won’t actually happen.”

“But it already has.” Wilbur swallowed, and both he and Tommy steeled themselves for what he was about to say. “Two months ago, the voices told me there was something coming. That an army was gathering at our northern borders.”

“But we don’t have any enemies.”

“That’s what I thought, too. But I sent some spies to investigate, just in case, and they confirmed it.” Wilbur steepled his fingers, his eyes as hard and dark as polished iron. “Just like the voices said. A war might be coming, Tommy.”

What was it that Techno had said? *Wilbur’s not having a very fun week*. Tommy might laugh at how huge of an understatement that was, if he wasn’t too busy choking on his own tongue.

War. Such a small word for such a big thing.

“Well.” Tommy slid to the floor as his legs gave out. “That’s that, then.”

“Techno and I are trying to make contact with the foreign army’s generals,” Wilbur said, and Tommy noticed for the first time how many silver hairs Wilbur had acquired, almost glowing in the moonlight streaming from the windows. “We’re doing everything we can to stop it from happening, Tommy. But, yes. That’s it. Those are my biggest secrets. The rest are inconsequential.” He took a deep breath, as if to steady himself. “I think it’s your turn, Tommy.”

Tommy laughed bitterly. “After that reveal, anything I say will just sound stupid.”

“It won’t,” Wilbur said resolutely. He leaned back on the settee, giving Tommy a gentle look. “Whenever you’re ready, Tommy. I’m right here.”

Tommy drew his legs towards himself and wrapped his arms around his knees, clinging on for dear life. This was too much, too fast. He wanted to yell. He wanted to crack his fists open on the marble statue with Techno’s little markings. He wanted to pinch himself and wake up yesterday, when nothing was wrong expect for the gnawing pain in his chest that had never gone away, even nine years later. He wanted his parents.

The world had gone suddenly dark, and in the shadows, Tommy finally let go.

“You want my secret, Wilbur?” He pressed his face against his knees, as if that might hide his shame from the world. “I saw him.”

There it was. The truth. Or a confession. Or both.

“That night, I saw him.”

He heard Wilbur suck in a breath. There was no need to elaborate. Between the two of them, there was only ever one ‘he,’ and only ever one night.

“He kissed my hair, and that’s what woke me. I saw him walk away from my bed, towards my window. I saw him open it, and I saw him climb out. Or jump out. I want to say he flew out, like a bird. But I don’t remember that part very well. What I do remember is just lying here. Fully awake, knowing something was really fucking wrong. I just laid there.” Tommy’s eyes began to sting, so he closed them shut before the first of the pathetic tears could fall. “Eventually, I climbed out of bed, and I went to their room, wanting to believe that I’d just dreamt it all. And that’s when I found Mama.”

He could still it, in his mind’s eye. He remembered so little of her, but he could never forget how he’d crawled up on the bed next to her, trying to wake her. He could never forget his confusion when she refused to, nor the blinding pain when he realized why.

“And most days, Wilbur, that’s all I think about. How I was awake and could have stopped him, and I could’ve made him stay, and you wouldn’t have needed to be king so young. I could have spared you for all of this, Wilbur. And now, everything’s gone to shit and it’s all my—” A sob tore free from his lips, sudden and unrelenting. “I want to help you. But I don’t know how. Nobody ever taught me how.”

“Tommy…” Wilbur’s voice sounded so far away.

“But the worst thing,” Tommy continued, trying to ignore the ever-tightening noose around his neck, “is that maybe I should have seen it coming. He used to come by your door, in the middle of the night, when you used to live across the hall. I kept my door open, just a crack, after the first time it happened, just to see if he would come again. And he did, so many times. I used to think he would knock eventually, but he never did.” Tommy tightened his hold on himself, shaking with grief, and maybe with relief, too. “I think he was saying goodbye long before he left, Wilbur.”

For a moment, the only response to his words was silence. Tommy was afraid to look up, to see if Wilbur had left, angry and betrayed.

But instead, Tommy felt warm arms encircle him and pull him towards something safe and solid.

“Tommy,” Wilbur whispered into Tommy’s hair, “you were *six*.”

And that was it. That was what broke Tommy, in the end. He crashed into his brother, wrapping his arms around Wilbur’s torso and burying his face in his chest. The tears finally came, a culmination of nine years of guilt and paranoia, of stumbling through life unsure of where he stood with his brother, of fearing that one day, Wilbur might find out what he failed to do and hate him forever.

But this wasn’t hate. This was the opposite.

“Shhh.” Wilbur ran a hand through Tommy’s hair. “It’s alright, Tommy. Let it all out.”

There was just the two of them in that moment. There were no voices, no ghosts, no secrets.

Just Wilbur and Tommy. Tommy and Wilbur.

Eventually, Tommy's sobbing ebbed. His cheeks were wet and cold from his tears, but he could breathe easier than ever did. He drew back from the circle of Wilbur's arms and found his brother looking at him with a gentleness that he could never deserve in a thousand years.

"See?" Wilbur said, delicately brushing stray tears from Tommy's cheeks. "Isn't it lighter with someone else to carry it with?"

Tommy sniffled. "You always have to be right, don't you?"

"Well, of course. Otherwise, I'd be stripped of my title as Grandmaster of Pretentiousness. The Council would have a field day."

Tommy laughed wetly. "What will your voices say after you suffer such a disgrace?"

"Funnily enough," Wilbur said softly, "they're very quiet right now."

"So what happens now?" Tommy whispered into the dark.

"I don't know," Wilbur confessed. "But what I *do* know is that there should be no more secrets between brothers. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Tommy smiled. "No more secrets."

Wilbur looked as if he wanted to say something else, but Tommy would never have the chance to find out what, because at that same moment, Techno burst through the door, his expression like hellfire.

Wilbur was on his feet in an instant, reaching for a crumpled note Techno was holding out to him. Tommy watched his brother's face drain of all color as his eyes scanned through the message.

"What?" Tommy demanded, his heartbeat ringing in his ears. "What does it say?"

When Wilbur looked back at him, his eyes were bleak and haunted. "You wanted to know what *conscriptions* were for, Tommy? Well, you're about to find out."

Chapter End Notes

hey hi! this was more of a bridging chapter to open for the next one, which is going to be a really long one so i hope you'll be patient with me and trust that ill do the climax of this story justice :)

story title and chapter titles all taken from "passerine" by the oh hellos. you can drop me a follow at twitter.com/thcscus :D

and stay safe out there! wear your masks <3

my birds of a kind (they more and more are looking like centurions)

Chapter Summary

All able citizens of the kingdom are called to the king’s castle, the letters all said, carried from bustling towns to quiet villages by messengers on the kingdom’s most swift-footed horses and courier birds taking to their familiar wind-carved routes. War is coming, and it is time to defend your motherland.

//

Or, war, warmth, and the act of welcoming someone home.

Chapter Notes

hi niki :D

Chapter's trigger/content warnings are as follows:
-
-
-
-
-
Violence/Depictions of violence
Assault
Death

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three men stood on a balcony where once there were two. A mortal king, a mortal prince, and their red-eyed teacher. In the gardens below, travelers were gathering, most weary from their journey from every corner of the vast kingdom. Even now, more were still pouring into the capital city, staring in wide-eyed confusion, a conscription notice tucked into their pockets or crushed between nervous fingers.

All able citizens of the kingdom are called to the king’s castle, the letters all said, carried from bustling towns to quiet villages by messengers on the kingdom’s most swift-footed horses and courier birds taking to their familiar wind-carved routes. *War is coming, and it is time to defend your motherland.*

The conscription letter had gone on to specify that only those over the age of eighteen were to be included in the king's army. Many had chosen to ignore that. Among the horde trickling slowly into the heart of the kingdom was a brown-haired boy a year shy of the stipulated age. He kept the hood of his battered cloak up, so no one could see the traces of boyhood still etched into his skin like a brand.

Someone noticed. It was a girl with hair as pink as the hibiscuses she grew in her garden. She had lived in the city all her life. Once, a man with the same hibiscus-pink hair had walked into her flower shop, his eyes bleak and unfocused. He'd asked her if she had any yellow roses for sale, and had bought it all. It was only later that she realized who the man was, but by then he'd already left, heading towards the woods that bordered the city. Now, she marched along the city streets that had become unfamiliar over the course of a week. She'd left her garden to the care of an elderly neighbor. A sign was left on her flower shop door, telling hopeful customers that it was closed indefinitely. There was nothing else to do now but follow the course of the crowd, keeping an eye on a stranger that was definitely much younger than her, wondering whether or not he'd outlive her.

They passed underneath the castle gates, where a woman they called the Captain kept a watchful eye. She was under orders to turn away anyone too young, too sick, too old—but every time she looked into their eyes, she only saw herself. She'd clawed her way to her position, made sure to earn her reputation, and had stood guard over the royal family for over a decade. It was her stubbornness that got her to where she was, adorned with medallions from the king—both old and new. It was stubbornness that she saw in these people now. So while she did her duty by barring the way for the youngest, the sickest and the oldest, if she turned away for a moment when an aged warrior did her best to hide the wrinkles on the backs of her scarred hands, or when a seventeen-year-old boy pulled his hood lower over his face, or when a strong-jawed smith from the city limped by her with a broken foot that wasn't quite healed yet… well, she would consider that her duty, too.

By the time the boy and the flower shopkeeper found themselves in the garden, it was crowded. People stood shoulder-to-shoulder, pushing and pulling like a tide on the trampled remains of the dead queen's flowers. The shopkeeper grimaced as her boots treaded across petals and stems, violently returning them to their soil. The boy did not notice the flowers at all. He was staring up at the balcony, looking at the man whose call was answered by thousands.

Most of them had never seen their king before, but they've all heard the stories of a boy crowned on the eve of his sixteenth birthday after his father's mysterious disappearance—or death, or assassination, depending on which rumors you believed—and guided by a strange adviser. A kingdom of peace would never have had any reason to know the name *Technoblade,* but those who heard the folk story of a red-eyed emperor from a cold and distant land whispered amongst themselves at the resemblance, or the coincidence, or whatever word they could use to explain away the uneasiness brewing in their gut.

The stories also said that the king was kind and generous, with the starry-eyed ambition that came with his youth, and that the younger prince could charm a thousand detractors with his wit and humor. Standing together, they seemed to be as different as night and day: one dark,

one light. But no one could deny the shared brotherhood etched into their regal bearing, both products of a boyhood almost drowned in etiquette and decorum.

The prince shifted closer to his brother. “That’s a lot of people, Wil,” he murmured.

The king’s eyes were unreadable in the hazy light of the clouded afternoon. “Not enough,” he replied.

Their tutor crossed his arms as he surveyed the gathering crowd, already calculating battle positions and drafting strategies. This was, after all, not his first war, nor did he think it would be his last. “I’ll oversee training as much as I can, for as long as we have time. I’ve identified some potential battalion leaders from the guards and the people who came earlier. I’ll delegate the responsibility of training the newer recruits.”

“Which is most of them,” Wilbur pointed out. “They never had a reason to learn how to fight, before this.”

“You underestimate your people, Wilbur,” Technoblade replied patiently. “There are other reasons besides war. Look, there. See that person with a bow? They’re a hunter—used to shooting down fast-moving targets, which makes them an asset for our archery line. Folks from the mountain regions are used to riding on horseback, so that’s our cavalry already established. Miners and smiths are used to swinging sharp and heavy objects around. Give them broadswords instead of pickaxes and hammers, and we’ll be ready to go.”

Wilbur cut him a bemused look. “You sound almost optimistic. Did you hit your head on a wall this morning?”

“I’ve seen worse odds.”

Tommy scoffed. “This is different from all your war books, Techno. This is real life.”

He did not notice the knowing look shared between his brother and their tutor.

“Anyway,” Technoblade continued, “I’ve reached out to mercenary guilds to supplement our offensive. Our coffers can handle the hit. After all, this kingdom has only been busy with trade for the decades.”

“And if it all goes to shit anyway?” Tommy asked quietly.

Technoblade’s expression hardened. “It won’t.”

“How can you be so sure?” demanded the young prince. “From what I’ve been hearing, we’re nothing more than a bunch of poor saps armed with twigs against this—this—what did they call themselves?”

“The Green Army,” Wilbur replied, not taking his eyes off the people below them.

“Ridiculous name, if you ask me,” Technoblade said.

Tommy did not laugh, as he usually would. “That message you received said they massacred an entire town, Wilbur,” he choked out. “An entire town, wiped out overnight like ants.”

Wilbur’s hands tightened around the balcony railings, his knuckles turning white as he squeezed. “They were taken by surprise. We will not be so unfortunate.”

None of them said the obvious, which was the fact that if Wilbur had not held his secrets so close to his chest, the town that once sat on their northern border might have survived. They might have been warned. They would have been saved from their merciless doom. Hypotheticals, Technoblade had told them before, were worthless, and only crippled their way forward. But it still sat in the uneasy silence between them, broken only by the tutor saying, “Other towns along the Green Army’s route have been evacuated. We should be expecting refugees to arrive in the city in three days, but the temporary camps will be finished and ready by then.”

“And what’s the status on the Army itself?”

“Based on the spies’ reports, we have half a month, at most, before they arrive at the Valley, which gives us another week to prepare the troops before we set out. The armory should be done tallying and divvying up weapons by tomorrow, and caravans have been loaded with other supplies.”

“And the other thing we planned…?”

“Gathering the materials as we speak. The alchemists are working as fast as they can, given that it’s delicate work. But it should be done before we go.”

“Good.” Wilbur raised his head towards the sun, breathing in the last sweet winds of spring. As he did, Tommy and Technoblade were the only ones to notice the fresh scratch marks running down the pale column of his throat. Tommy opened his mouth to speak, but was silenced by a quiet shake of Techno’s head. “I guess it’s time.”

In one smooth motion, Technoblade jumped onto the balcony railings, balancing precariously like an acrobat on a tightrope, his beloved trident in his hand. He drove the butt of the trident against the railings, producing a sound like a bell tolling, over and over until the crowd was almost silent, their attention caught.

“Your king,” he shouted, “will now speak. I suggest you listen.”

He dropped back between Tommy and Wilbur, who gave him a grateful smile before turning back to their people. Their army.

“Friends,” Wilbur began, his voice carrying out over the still crowd, now hanging on to his every word. “I see you all from where I stand. I understand you are afraid. You are confused. Years ago, I promised you peace on my father’s crown, and now I call you to war. This is nothing less than treason. Rest assured, I will be facing consequences for it.”

The crowd stirred. Even Tommy looked to his brother in surprise, a question swiftly dying on his lips as Wilbur spoke on.

“But that will be later,” the king continued. “For now, we face an enemy that has mercilessly slaughtered our brethren on the northern border. That is what we shall keep in mind as we ready to face them. More than a battle to defend ourselves, this is a war of revenge. We shall remember the innocents lost to the nonsensical greed of our invaders, and I vow to deliver you your vengeance on a silver platter.”

Techno’s eyes darkened, but he did not interrupt. His gaze drifted to the marble pavilion sitting in the distance, right where the crowd stopped. Its chests had been pilfered, the blunted training weapons melted down to make sharper, deadlier blades. The ivy tumbling from its roof swayed slightly in the wind, offering him a brief glimpse at the empty, dust-covered floor beyond.

He wondered if he’d ever set foot in it again.

The shopkeeper was the only one not watching the king as he spoke of bravery and keeping the faith. Instead, she followed the tutor’s far-off gaze, but all she could see was a small white building, overgrown with weeds.

“This will not be the end of our nation,” the king said with a note of finality, his dark eyes sweeping across the gathered crowd, but not seeing their faces at all. He spread his arms, as if welcoming an embrace from someone no one else could see. “It has stood for centuries, and it will stand for centuries more. We will see our enemies burning, my friends, and I will scatter their ashes on the graves of the people they took from us. And anyone who survives the fire will wish they had perished in the flames, and not by my hands. My only hope is that you might feel the same, and trust that you are in the most capable hands I could find.” He turned to the tutor. “You are in the safe keeping and guidance of General Technoblade. Together, we will defend this kingdom—or die trying.”

The silence of the crowd gave way to thunderous applause, the exultant cry of hundreds of people who did not know, truly, what awaited them on the battlefield. The aged warrior with the scarred hands was intimately familiar with violence, and turned bitterly away from the excitement. She had been like them, once, but no longer. They would learn, sooner or later, but it would not be a gentle lesson.

However, they were united in some things. They trusted their young king and their prince. They trusted their general. And they wished to see their enemies burn.

The boy in the crowd felt that unity down to his bones. *This is it*, he thought, this was what it meant to be a part of something. To belong. He felt a smile creep onto his face, and soon he was joining the noise, hollering until his lungs began to ache, joining in the people’s furious glee. He was going to hold the line. He was going to drive the enemy back, and protect the land that raised him. And he was going to be a hero. At seventeen years old, Tubbo was the oldest he’d ever been, but he never felt so young.

Only one person did not seem impressed by the king’s words. The tutor-turned-general was staring at the king, his mouth a thin line of disapproval.

“Since when did I get the promotion?” Technoblade asked slowly.

Wilbur shrugged, dismissive. “You’re already acting like a general, anyway.”

“But I—”

“Technoblade.” The king’s voice turned cold as he stared his old tutor down. “You promised to help me. Was that a lie?”

Technoblade’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Careful, Wilbur,” he said quietly. “You’re forgetting who you’re talking to.”

Wilbur blinked, his eyes suddenly clearing. He opened his mouth for some sort of retort, perhaps an apology, but then there was Tommy—brilliant, loud Tommy—leaning so far over the railings, Technoblade had to pull him back by the back of his shirt. When he turned to them, he was beaming, his eyes bright in the afternoon gloom.

“We’re going to win,” Tommy said, his ears still ringing with the crowd’s approval. “We’re actually going to win, aren’t we?”

Wilbur and Techno exchanged one glance—one glance, and all was forgiven, the conversation shelved for another day. The general still looked at the king with something close to concern, and the dark circles under the king’s eyes were getting harder and harder to ignore each day, but none of that mattered anymore. If Tommy said they were going to win, then by the gods, neither of them would tell him otherwise, not when he looked the happiest he’d been in a month.

“By this time next month, we’ll be back to worrying about trade routes and bothersome sycophants,” Wilbur assured him.

“What the hell’s a sycophant?”

“Gods.” The king gave his brother a look that was equal parts annoyed and adoring. “Remind me to hire a better linguistics tutor for you when we get home.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “Good luck finding someone that can stand me. I’ll chase anyone away in three days, at most. Bet your whole damn life on it.”

Wilbur grinned at Technoblade. “I can think of one person. Techno, will you—”

“Finish that sentence,” Technoblade drawled in his usual monotone manner, “and I will end your bloodline right on this balcony. I will throw you off, witnesses be damned.”

As the king and prince dissolved into laughter—for one, shining moment, children again—Technoblade found himself smiling. The sky was dark and bleak, but there, on that balcony, there was sunlight.

“It’s you and me,” said Technoblade, putting one hand on top of Tommy’s head, the other on Wilbur’s shoulder. “One more time.”

The Blue Valley stretched before Tommy, disappearing into the hazy horizon. The two mountains that bordered the valley rose menacingly in front of him, twin endpoints of the imposing mountain ranges that served as the kingdom's natural borders. A river ran through the middle of the valley, lit into liquid gold by the sun slowly rising over the distant hills.

All in all, Tommy thought as he breathed in the cold dawn air, this would not be the worst-looking place to die in.

The valley was named after the blue irises that thrived in it, lining the cliffsides and blooming along the riverbanks. But they were not the flowers Tommy was in search for.

He ventured down the hillside, keeping his eyes close to the ground. He'd rolled up his pantlegs to keep them dry from the morning dew that clung to the underbrush, but it left everything below his knees vulnerable to the traps that had been set around camp. One wrong move and he'd lose a foot for his troubles. But he was determined to make the trip worth it.

It had been a week since they'd arrived at the valley, and while that meant most of their preparations were finished, it also meant that the other shoe would drop any day now. Tommy could feel it breathing down his neck. The only way to combat it was relentless distraction—keeping his hands busy. So he traveled down the hill, one careful step at a time, until a flash of yellow in his periphery caught his attention.

"Found you," he said, making his way over to the flowers clustered under a rock, almost indistinguishable from their blue-iris neighbors, if it weren't for the golden center that earned them their name.

When Tommy strolled back into camp, he had a fistful of morning glories clutched in his hand and a grin on his face. Everybody was already awake—clustered around cookfires, going through morning exercises, or just milling about. Someone had brought their guitar, and its soft music echoed above the sounds of conversation and laughter. People raised their heads when Tommy passed, calling his name or waving him over to join them for breakfast. He cheerfully declined, but not before exchanging jokes and pleasantries with some of the more familiar folk.

It was easy to miss the shadows this way. In the right light, he might miss the tussled hair of those that had not slept in days, or the bleak look on the Captain's face quickly hidden by a strained smile, or the smell of sulfur that clung to their clothes like a nasty, unrelenting parasite.

"It's pretty tragic, isn't it?"

The question stopped Tommy dead in his tracks. He turned towards the person who'd asked, and found himself in front of a girl seated by a grindstone, slowly sharpening a small blade. "Pardon?"

The girl smiled as she nodded towards the flowers in his hands. "Morning glories. They wilt the same day that they bloom, lasting only until the sun sets." She paused. "Maybe less, now that you've picked them."

Tommy flushed with embarrassment, suddenly getting the urge to hide the bouquet behind his back, as if that might somehow erase what he did. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think about—”

The girl simply laughed. “No, don’t be. I would be the world’s biggest hypocrite if I told you off for picking flowers.” At Tommy’s confused look, she explained, “I own a flower shop, back in the city.”

“*Oh*.” Tommy looked down at the flowers clutched in his hand, his brows furrowing as he thought. “It is sad, I suppose, that they die so quickly. But aren’t they beautiful while they last?”

The grindstone slowly ground to a halt as the girl merely sat there, staring at Tommy with an inexplicable expression on her face.

Well, thought Tommy, *this is awkward*.

“You know, Your Highness,” the girl said at length, “you remind me of someone. He’s a soldier in this camp, and about your age, as well. He’s off somewhere training right now, but I have this feeling that if you’d only meet, you’d make good friends.”

Tommy opened his mouth to reply, but found he could only nod in agreement. The girl gave him a small, sad smile, as if she could understand his silence even more than if he had spoken, and went back to her work. Tommy pried his feet from the ground and begun walking towards the heart of the camp, but the girl’s words followed close on his heels. That was the true tragedy, wasn’t it? More than the flowers that only bloomed for a day, the bitterest devastation was in the *what-if*s. Tommy didn’t understand why, but he found himself lingering one scenario: a different life where he had met that person that he reminded the girl of, where neither of them were young soldiers. *You’d make good friends,* she’d said, but that wasn’t right. Tommy felt, inexplicably, down to his bones, that if he’d met that boy, they would be brothers.

It was only until the royal tent was in view that Tommy realized he didn’t even ask the girl for the boy’s name.

“—if we move this battalion here, they could provide cover. But we would also run the risk of—Tommy?”

Tommy looked up. He hadn’t even realized he’d entered the tent. He found Wilbur standing at the large desk that took up the most room, leaning over a map littered with small carved pieces that represented various troop positions. Beside him, his hair unbound, was Technoblade. Both were staring at Tommy with concern.

“What?” he demanded.

“You’re—You’re crying, Tommy,” Wilbur said softly.

Tommy touched his free hand to his cheek, and was surprised to find it come away wet. He rubbed furiously at his eyes until they were clear of tears. This was not the time. *This was not the fucking time*.

He strode deeper into the tent, ignoring the worried look Wilbur threw Techno, and Techno's answering shrug. Tommy stopped at one corner of the map and pointed to a cluster of carved archers clustered on what would be the hill they were currently on.

"We don't need that many," he said determinedly. "Just one. Just you, Wilbur."

Wilbur seemed frustrated by the change of topic, but had no choice other than to follow his little brother's lead. "You're overestimating my aim, Tommy."

Tommy drifted away from the map, throwing himself on a spare chair in the corner. He gestured Techno over, and the general silently complied.

"You always pull through when it matters," Tommy said as Techno took a seat on the ground in front of him, his back to Tommy. As Tommy gathered Technoblade's hair into his lap, he added, "Except the many, many times you lost a duel with Techno."

Normally, this would warrant a chuckle or, at the very least, an indignant eyeroll, but Wilbur simply leaned over the map again, his expression shuttered once more.

Techno turned to Tommy and whispered, "We must not break his intense, beast-like focus."

Tommy snorted. "The only *beast-like* thing about him is that tangled lion's mane he calls hair."

Wilbur's head snapped up to glare at them both. "I heard that."

"Of course you did," Techno said, turning back away. "Lions have an unparalleled sense of hearing."

Tommy laughed quietly to himself as he began braiding Techno's hair, his fingers making knots with the ease that came with years of practice. This had been their routine for the past week: Wilbur would pore over the battle plans with wild-eyed obsession that got more and more frenzied by the day, Techno would call out every flaw in Wilbur's proposed changes until they encountered one that seemed to be actually useful, and Tommy would braid. It kept his hands busy. If it weren't for the distraction of Techno's hair between his fingers, Tommy would most likely join the flower shop girl over the grindstone, mindlessly polishing his spear until doomsday.

Sometimes, Tommy would wake up in the middle of the night and find his brother still awake, reviewing their plans and muttering to himself—or, not to himself. The voices. The mysterious, omniscient, creepy-as-all-hell voices that had plagued his brother for years.

Tommy began to weave the morning glories he'd found into Techno's hair, to hide the fact that his hands had started shaking. Two nights before had been the worst of it. Tommy had been awoken by the noise of glass shattering. Opening his eyes, he found Wilbur standing over his cot, a shard of broken glass clutched in his hand and raised over his head, ready to strike it into Tommy's chest.

Tommy had stopped breathing completely. “Wil?” he’d said, his voice coming out meek and trembling.

“We’re meant to kill you,” Wilbur had croaked, blood dripping down his arm from how tightly he was holding the broken glass. “We’re going to kill you, Tommy. It’s fate, it’s meant to be—”

“Wilbur.” Tommy had reached out to clutch at his brother’s shirt. “Wilby, please, don’t hurt me.”

Wilbur had blinked rapidly, his eyelashes glistening with unshed tears. “You haven’t called me that in such long time.” And the glass shard had dropped, but not into Tommy’s flesh—into the ground beside his cot, driven into the soft dirt. Wilbur had kneeled beside him for the rest of the night, whispering apologies that chased Tommy into his uneasy sleep. By morning, Wilbur seemed to have completely forgotten the incident, or chosen to ignore it completely, and Tommy was already plucking flowers off the hillside with shaky fingers.

Tommy looked up now to find a white cloth tied around Wilbur’s left hand, where the glass had cut into his skin. It was the only evidence that that night had not been a dream, and that Wilbur’s voices were slowly taking over.

It must be the stress, Tommy thought as he braided the last of the morning glories into Techno’s hair. When the war was over, Wilbur would be back to normal again, and Tommy could go back to not being absolutely terrified of his older brother.

“Done,” Tommy said at last, flicking Techno’s finished braid over Techno’s shoulder.

“*Finally*.” Techno stood and plucked one of the morning glories off his hair. He tucked it behind Tommy’s ear before moving over to one of the chests tucked under the table. “Consider this as a sign of my gratitude.”

He opened the chest and pulled out something dark and folded. When he unfurled it, Tommy shot to his feet, his eyes going wide at the blue-and-red coat Techno held up, its golden buttons gleaming, the royal coat-of-arms stitched over where Tommy’s heart would be.

“They finished it.” Tommy couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled out of him. “They actually finished it.”

“Gods, Tommy,” Techno said with a small smile. “It’s just a uniform.”

But it wasn’t *just* that, and Techno knew it. He and Wilbur had received their own uniforms weeks before, the general and the king in their bold colors. In the chaos of preparation, no one had noticed the prince following in their wake in a simple white tunic until the very last minute. And now the tailors had done it. They’d actually finished it.

Tommy bounded up to Techno, grinning so hard he thought his cheeks might split from pure glee. Techno rolled his eyes, but held out the coat for Tommy to slip into. It fit. Perfectly.

Tommy spun in a small circle before giving Techno a mocking bow. “Sir General.”

Techno returned the gesture. “Your Highness.”

“You two,” Wilbur said, and Tommy could hear the smile in his voice, however faint, “are so stupid.”

Tommy waltzed over to his brother, knocking the carved piece that Wilbur was about to put down on the map. Over the sounds of Wilbur’s protests, Tommy grabbed his hands and pulled him along, humming a vaguely-familiar tune, spinning him in slow circles that could be called a dance under the loosest of definitions. Wilbur went slack as Tommy continued to hum the song, allowing Tommy to spin him more and more.

“I can’t believe you still remember that,” Wilbur said softly, his expression unfathomable.

“Remember what?”

“That song—”

And then they heard it. The sound that turned Tommy’s blood cold. The sound that made Tommy and Wilbur freeze in their tracks. The sound that made Techno reach instinctively towards both of them.

The drums of war, echoing over camp, eclipsing the music of a guitar, the conversations of friends, the screeching of a blade against a grindstone, the *thud thud thud* of a seventeen-year-old soldier practicing his archery against a dark oak tree, the *thud thud thud* of the army’s collective heartbeat, the *thud thud thud* of a thousand feet marching closer and closer.

The enemy had arrived at the Blue Valley.

They emerged from the mist like specters, the hazy sunlight glinting off their polished blades. Up on the hill, Techno could see them moving through the valley in a steady stream, the soldiers indistinguishable in their tight formation. At the front, someone bore their flag: two swords crossed on a simple green background. The sight of it made Techno ball up his fists with a sudden, unidentifiable anger.

This was it. It seemed like the entirety of the Green Army was here, as expected; while the valley would serve as a chokepoint in the Royal Army’s favor, it was also the only direct path towards the heart of the kingdom. So now both sides were going to throw all their pieces on the board. One decisive battle, a quick end. Only one army would emerge from this valley intact—and Techno would be damned if it wasn’t Wilbur’s.

Techno turned to the king standing beside him. “Are you ready?”

Wilbur’s eyes were looked on the mountains. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

The camp behind them was empty. Everyone was in position, moving like clockwork under orders that they’d been practicing for days. The only ones left on the hill were Wilbur, Tommy, and Techno.

And the archers.

Tommy bounded up to them at last, his chest heaving with effort. “They sent up the flare,” he announced breathlessly. “It’s go time.”

Wilbur turned towards the group of archers behind him. Between them was a raging campfire, sending flickering shadows over Wilbur’s face as he took one arrow from his quiver and dipped its cloth-covered point into the flames. The dozen archers—the best of the best, handpicked by Wilbur himself—copied him wordlessly. The cloth, smothered in a special incendiary fuel, would burn faithfully until it reached its mark.

Wilbur turned back towards the Valley, nocking the arrow into his bow. With a deep breath, he pulled the arrow back and aimed towards the sky. Behind him, the archers did the same.

“Hold,” he ordered.

The Green Army marched closer.

“*Hold*!”

Techno felt a hand close around his, nails digging into his palm, and looked down to find Tommy staring intently at the encroaching forces, his eyes unblinking. They were close enough now that Techno could see the glare of the dawning sun bouncing off their breastplates.

Wordlessly, Techno squeezed Tommy’s hand.

Now, Techno thought. *It has to be now*. At the same time, Wilbur called out, “Fire!”

A dozen and one burning arrows arched out over the valley like comets of red and gold. The Green Army paused, perhaps in confusion at the pathetic display of force—just thirteen arrows soaring across the air. It would not even hit their frontlines.

But that didn’t matter. They were not the intended target.

Once upon a time, Wilbur’s aim had been so poor, it would have taken nothing short of divine intervention to correct it.

So Techno corrected it. Now, Wilbur shot true. His arrow landed amongst the weeds, and then there was fire.

It felt like the whole valley was set ablaze, the heat searing Techno’s skin even from where he stood. The burning arrows had ignited a line of fire that ran horizontally through the valley, cutting the Green Army off completely. Soldiers from the Royal Army had doused that area in the ever-burning fuel the moment they saw the enemy coming, and then promptly fell back into the mountains, taking shelter for the next phase. The fire would not hold them off forever.

Wilbur gave a signal, and the archers scattered to their next positions, leaving the three of them truly alone, watching the wall of fire for the first signs of life. It came in the form of a man in a white cloak, stepping through the flames like it was merely an inconvenience. He

shrugged off the heat, flicking an ember off his shoulder before his eyes found them on the hill. He pointed his sword, straight at Wilbur.

“That isn’t a white flag of surrender, Techno,” Wilbur said quietly.

“No, it is not,” Techno replied, finally letting go of Tommy’s hand and reaching for his trident. “It was a long shot, anyway. A little heat is nothing to mass murderers.”

You should know, his voices purred.

This is not the time for your sass, Techno thought back, as if that might stop the age-old melody that was starting to play in his head.

The rest of the enemy army followed after the man in white, less gracefully, but stubbornly—like godsdamned cockroaches crawling over the valley. And then there was a battle cry, ringing from all directions as the Royal Army appeared from their hiding spots—in trees or in the weeds, from the river and from the mountains—and catching their enemy by surprise. But the Green Army was well-trained. They recovered swiftly, and though most of their army was stuck behind the fire, they were biting back. It wasn’t long until bodies were dropping—and not just the enemies’.

Techno’s hand tightened around his trident as the valley filled with sounds of war, but it was not out of fear. Techno would never admit it out loud, but he could feel something almost like excitement pounding through his veins. This was familiar. This was something he knew, deep in his bones, he could do without failure. Being Wilbur’s teacher, and then Tommy’s—*that* had been terrifying. But this? This was nothing. This was just another battle to fight, just another war to win.

“We need to help,” Tommy said, his feet already moving down the hill.

Wilbur’s hand shot out, dragging Tommy backwards. Both Techno and Tommy looked at him in surprise, but Wilbur was looking past them, at the carnage happening right below their feet, his eyes dark as the earth of a freshly-dug grave.

“Wilbur?” Tommy asked in astonishment.

Wilbur blinked rapidly, like he was coming out of a dream. “Not yet,” he said quietly.

“What do you mean not yet?” Tommy demanded, pulling himself out of Wilbur’s grip. “Our people are *dying* down there!”

“Wilbur.” Techno spun Wilbur by the shoulders towards him. “We have to go. *Now*.”

Wilbur took a rattling breath. “I know. Gods damn it, I *know*.” He glanced at Tommy, standing beside them with his face drawn in confusion. “But I can’t let Tommy—”

“Don’t talk about me like I’m not fucking here!” Tommy spat angrily. “Wilbur, this is neither the time nor place to underestimate me. We need to fucking go!”

“Tommy,” Wilbur said, staring at Tommy in shock, “I never underestimate you—”

“Then prove it! Let’s *go*.”

“You’re right.” Tired resignation colored Wilbur’s words. “But stay close to me.” He looked grimly back at Techno. “Don’t lose yourself out there.”

Techno could hear the warning in his voice.

“Take your own advice, Your Majesty,” Techno replied sourly, taking in Wilbur’s wide eyes and trembling hands.

“I’m serious, Techno.” Wilbur’s expression hardened as he lowered his voice, speaking to Techno and Techno only while Tommy was distracted by fight below. “This is a direct order from your king. Keep them in check.”

He thinks he can control you, the voices whispered. *He thinks he is your master. Will you prove him right, like the loyal little dog you are?*

“I promise, Wilbur,” Techno said.

After all, domesticated dogs, someone once said, still fucking bite.

“Alright,” Wilbur said, shouldering his bow with a look of determination. “Let’s go to war, boys.”

The first time the Captain killed someone, she was fifteen. He would have killed her. She had seen it in his eyes, lost to a drunken frenzy in a small, lonely tavern far from here. He’d come at her with his heavy hands, and so she’d taken a bottle from one of the tables and broke it against the side of his head. And when that hadn’t been enough to stop him, she’d shoved the sharp pieces clean into his throat.

She’d ran from the tavern right after, ran from the town and didn’t stop running until she reached the kingdom capital, where a king with mercy sewn into his smile had offered her a job, a home, and a life that ensured no man would ever dare cross her again.

But even after all these years, the Captain could still remember the feeling of skin giving way beneath the sharpness of her weapon. She could still see the man’s face, contorting with pain and disbelief, barely able to process what was happening before the death throes took him. She could still hear him choking on his own blood, gurgling wetly before he was finally, *finally* still. But there was a moment, between the killing and the running, where she merely sat beside the corpse of her own doing, numb and empty and cold.

The soldiers this time would not be so lucky.

She could see it in their faces: the ones who’d never seen a day of violence in their lives, making their first kills right in front her. She could some of them hesitate, panic, fall into the same abyss she did once before. Most shook themselves out of it, their brains shelving the damage for another day. But others stood frozen, caught in their own thoughts, until their comrades found them—or their enemies did.

The Captain could not help. She wanted to, more than anything, because wasn't that her job? Wasn't she meant to protect them?

And then another enemy would come flying her way, and all she could think about was staying alive and surviving to the next hour, the next minute, the next breath. The Green Army had already begun to find ways through the wall of fire, and it wouldn't be long until the rest of them would arrive with a vengeance.

The Captain swung her gladius, deflecting the oncoming blow of an enemy before thrusting her blade deep into his chest. She did not look to see him fall; she was already moving across the battlefield, slicing her way towards a group of Royal soldiers pinned between a rocky incline and half a dozen enemies. She took two down before the rest noticed her, and the Captain found herself facing four people at once.

With a shield in one hand and her sword in the other, there was little the Captain could do but face them down.

This is it, she thought, *this is my final stand*.

"You little shit," one of them spat at her. "You think you're so brave, all on your own?"

They surged towards her, and the Captain raised her shield instinctively for a blow that never came. When she looked again, she found all four soldiers dead on the ground, with a man in a red-and-blue coat and flowers in his hair standing over the still-twitching bodies. Blood dripped down the prongs of his trident, too much to have come from just the four bodies. Four throwing knives were already missing from the bandolier across his chest, and the expression on his face was cold enough to freeze hell.

"Stop staring and get to work, soldier," Technoblade said—the very same Technoblade the Captain had seen carrying the small prince on his shoulders around the castle, the same Technoblade that shuffled uncomfortably in too-tight suits at formal functions that he nevertheless always saw through to the end, the same Technoblade that the past king, the Captain's savior, entrusted with his sons.

The Captain could barely recognize him.

But then again, something in the back of her mind told her that she was truly seeing him for the first time. She'd heard the rumors, the whispers, the questions about how he never seemed to change over the years. She disregarded all of that now. He was the man who'd just saved her life. Nothing else mattered in war.

She saluted. "Sir, yes, sir!"

With a curt nod, Technoblade was off, merely a blur of color cutting a violent path across the valley, his trident flashing in the sunlight. A whimper caught the Captain's attention, and she turned back to the Royal soldiers that she had been trying to rescue.

"Are you alright?" she asked them.

One of them—a fresh recruit she did not recognize—blubbered, “Who the hell was that?”

“That was your bloody General,” she snapped. “So you can stop cowering in your corner now. The Blade has just joined the fight.”

The laughter was the worst of it. Wilbur could feel it growing louder in his head, the sound of a thousand different voices laughing at a joke he was not privy to—a joke with him as the punchline. But then the still-healing wound on his hand would ache, reminding him of what he’d done and where he was. He was standing on a rock, feet braced against moss, felling distant enemies with arrows. He was King Wilbur, Protector of the Realm, Ruler of the Kingdom, Leader of the Royal Army, and he’d brought all these people here.

And he was not going to let them down.

He could spot Tommy’s golden head below him, clearing out the enemies that slipped by Wilbur’s shots. He was good. Frighteningly good. It was easy to forget how capable Tommy was at destruction. He was so used to seeing Tommy lose against Techno that he’d forgotten that against anyone else, Tommy was a force to be reckoned with all on his own.

But that did not do much to dispel the worry tightening in Wilbur’s gut. He was, after all, also an older brother.

Tommy launched himself at an incoming enemy, spear out. The enemy swung with his sword, but Tommy ducked just in time and swept his leg out to knock the man over. Wilbur saw the spear pierce clean through, and the body was still twitching on the ground before Tommy was whirling around to face another. This one didn’t even get a meter near Tommy before Wilbur had put an arrow through their throat.

Tommy whirled around and flashed Wilbur a grin. “Not bad, archer boy!”

Despite everything, Wilbur managed a small smile. A smile that slipped from his face when a sudden motion flickered in the corner of his vision.

“Tommy, *watch out*!” Wilbur shouted, just as the enemy solider barreled into Tommy. The two of them tumbled into the dirt, a tangle of limbs and blades.

Wilbur fumbled for an arrow and found his quiver empty.

Shit! he thought.

Shit, the voices agreed happily.

Wilbur hurriedly slung his bow over his shoulder and, in the same breath, unsheathed his twin rapiers from their scabbards. He dropped down from his perch, his teeth rattling on impact, the pain not registering because *Tommy’s in trouble.*

The enemy soldier had Tommy pinned to the ground, a sword raised over his head and ready to drop. Tommy was thrashing, desperately reaching for the spear that had been knocked out of his hand, but Wilbur was already kicking the enemy violently off him. The enemy rolled

across the ground, allowing Wilbur to stand between him and Tommy, the twin swords flashing menacingly in the flickering firelight.

“Get the fuck away from my brother,” he hissed.

“How touching,” the soldier said mockingly. He was different from the others, Wilbur could tell. He didn’t know how, exactly, but he just *was*. His eyes and hair were as black as coal, in stark contrast to the blood-stained white cloak he wore around his shoulders.

“You…” Wilbur said, brows furrowing. “I saw you walk through the fire. How?”

The man scoffed. “You think that little stunt could hurt me?” He raised his blade—upon closer inspection, it looked to be made of pure obsidian, pitch-black all the way down to the hilt. “I was *born* in fire.”

“Are you the leader of this army?” Wilbur demanded.

He gave a short bark of laughter. “*Me?* No, no, I’m merely a pawn in this game. A pawn with a grudge to settle, but still a pawn nonetheless.” He grinned. “Now, show me what he taught you, king.”

Wilbur didn’t need to be told twice. He launched himself at the man, blue irises crunching beneath his feet. Their swords met, and from there it was a dance. Blades flashed as Wilbur began pushing the man backwards, but he was matching Wilbur hit for hit. Wilbur thrusted forward with his left sword, but the man dodged fluidly before swinging his sword in a mean arc that would have taken Wilbur’s head clean off if he had not stepped backwards. From there, the man launched his offensive, striking from above, but Wilbur managed to cross his rapiers together and blocked the hit just in time. The blow reverberated down to Wilbur’s bones, but the man gave him no time to recover, pushing his blade harder against Wilbur’s. Wilbur dug his heels into the ground and parried, using the man’s weight against him. He’d hoped it would cause the man to stumble and end this matter once and for all, but instead, the man swung again, feigning another overhead strike before changing to a side hit at the last moment.

Wilbur blocked the blow, but the force of it sent him crashing to the ground. The white-cloaked soldier stood over him, a small smile playing on his lips.

“That was disappointing,” he said, spinning his sword lazily between his fingers. As if he had all the time in the world. “At the very least, I expected a man trained under a god of blood to, well, actually draw some.”

Wilbur froze. He glared up at the man standing before him, suddenly understanding.

“You’re here for Techno.”

The man stopped spinning his sword. “I’m surprised he told you what he is. You must mean a lot to him.” His smile was slow and cold. “That makes this all the more fun.”

He raised his sword and brought it crashing down.

It might have been hours. It might have been days. It might even have been between the space of one breath and another. Technoblade could no longer tell.

More and more of enemy were finding ways to breach the wall of fire. The Royal Army's archers were doing their best to snipe them down before they could join the fray, but their dreadful lack of experience was beginning to show. Cracks were forming. They were nearing a breaking point.

No, Techno thought, trident in one hand, a bone-handled chain whip in the other. *Not if I can help it*.

He found himself in the thick of it, drawn not to the violence but to the sounds of Wilbur's people—*his* people—calling for help. A god's help.

Blood, the voices demanded. *Blood for the blood god*.

But Techno didn't want blood, not today. He wanted justice.

"Get down," he told the Royal Army soldiers that had gathered around him. Techno realized with a jolt that they had not come to him to ask for his protection, but to give him theirs. As if their fragile mortal bodies might make a difference when it came to him. *Fools,* he wanted to say, but all that came out was, "On the ground, all of you, *now*."

They were quick to comply. They dove into the weeds just as Techno lashed out with his whip. The heavy chain carved an arc through the air before finding its mark, wrapping around the neck of an enemy soldier. Techno pulled sharply, knocking the soldier down. He shook the whip free and spun it around to hit an incoming enemy straight in the head. There was a sickening crunch as the force of the whip crushed bone. Before the body hit the ground, Techno spun the whip towards other targets—aiming for throats, temples, ankles, anything to pull or crush. He was standing in the eye of the storm, his whip cracking through the air like lightning.

When the chain whip rattled back into his hands again, it was wet with blood.

"You can get up now," he told the soldiers that were staring dazedly up at him from the ground. "Take care of the stragglers."

"What *stragglers?"* one of them called out incredulously, but Techno was already moving again.

He launched himself into the air, for a brief moment flying weightlessly over the carnage, and then he crashed down with his trident, impaling a man to the earth. He pulled the trident out with a sickening squelch and then threw a throwing knife right into the eye of an approaching soldier. Another came running towards him, but he made quick work of them, too.

This was his element. This was where he belonged.

More, the voices demanded, *more more more—*

This was not his element.

This was not where he belonged.

He was under strict orders from the king to keep himself in check, and he would not falter now.

And then he heard it. Techno could not explain how he heard it over the sounds of swords clashing and people dying and fires burning. It was as if his very soul had only been listening for that sound, and nothing else.

In the far distance, a scream.

When he was a child, Tommy had tried to scale the side of the castle. He did not remember the fall, but he remembered the crash. He remembered the feeling of his bones splintering underneath him, the pain so blinding that he almost passed out. He didn't know who eventually found him, but he eventually woke up in his bedroom, his left arm in a sling and Wilbur asleep by his bedside. Techno had been leaning against the far wall, glaring at him.

"He's been here for days," Techno had said. "You really scared the shit out of him, Tommy."

It was the angriest Techno had ever been at him, and that was the moment Tommy understood that what he really meant was that Tommy scared the shit out of both of them.

As the white-cloaked man's sword broke through the shaft of Tommy's spear and into Tommy's shoulder, he remembered that pain, and felt it a thousandfold. He felt the blade break through skin and embed itself in his collarbone, and there was only fire in his veins.

"Tommy!" He felt Wilbur's hand pulling him back, and they both stumbled backwards, Tommy still clutching the broken ends of the spear he'd tried to shield Wilbur with.

Tommy fell to his knees, the pain making everything go white. *I'm going to pass out,* he thought, *I'm going to die—*

"Little hero," the man grumbled as he approached them once again, the edge of his sword dripping with Tommy's blood. "You're only delaying the inevitable. Now sit still as I put you down."

"Tommy." Wilbur's hands were on him, pressing against his wound. "Tommy, Tommy, come here, I'll fix you, I'll fix you—"

"Wilbur," Tommy croaked as the white-cloaked man advanced. "Wilbur, the enemy—"

"Say your goodbyes, princeling," the man cackled, raising his sword one final time.

Tommy grabbed Wilbur, even as his entire body trembled with the movement, covering his older brother's body with his own. He shut his eyes, waiting for the coup de grâce.

It never came.

When Tommy looked back again, he found Technoblade standing over them, blocking the man's sword with his trident.

"Finally," the man growled, pushing against the shaft of Techno's trident. "I've been waiting for you, you bloody bastard."

Techno cocked his head to the side, considering the man at length. "I," he said monotonously, "don't fucking know you."

The man's eyes hardened. "You killed them. You took them both away from me, and you don't even remember." He jumped back, cutting the air between them with his sword, splattering the ground by Techno's feet with Tommy's blood. "That's alright. I'll just make you remember."

Techno turned to look at Tommy and Wilbur, his expression carefully neutral. He took in Tommy's wound, Wilbur still frantically trying to suppress the blood flow.

"Techno," Tommy breathed.

Techno's jaw clenched. "Go." He turned back to his enemy, his braid whipping in the wind. Most of the morning glories were gone. "Take care of your brother, Wilbur."

"What—"

"Tommy, let's go," Wilbur said sharply. He began to pull Tommy over to the mossy rock he'd been standing on. He leaned Tommy against it and bent to the task of securing the gash in Tommy's shoulder. Wilbur ripped the end of his red-and-blue coat and began wrapping it around Tommy's shoulder.

"I can't see, Wilbur," Tommy protested, straining to look beyond Wilbur's head.

"You don't need to see that," Wilbur insisted grimly, tightening the cloth around the wound. "You don't *want* to see that."

"See what?" Tommy demanded, his throat aching. When had he started screaming? "Wilbur, we need to help him!"

Before Wilbur could reply, there was a loud *crack*, like thunder, making them both flinch. Wilbur turned towards the sound, just enough for Tommy to catch a glimpse of the fighting over his shoulder, just enough for him to see Technoblade raise the man up by his collar and drive him straight into the ground, shattering the earth once more.

He was supposed to be dead. As Technoblade drove him against the dirt with enough force to crack it, he knew the man should have died the first time around. But he didn't. Instead, he merely grinned up at Technoblade with bloody teeth, his face drawn in cold and—much to Techno's chagrin—completely earned arrogance.

"Ah. I see," Techno said with his hand around the man's throat. "What's a god of war doing in a place like this?"

“I would state the obvious,” the man said calmly, gesturing to the bloodbath around them. “But this is a purely personal affair.”

He kicked up, landing a hit on Techno’s gut that launched him backwards. Techno’s braced himself against the dirt, unwilling to give the war god anymore ground. Tommy and Wilbur were somewhere behind him, and that was all the reason Techno needed to pick up his trident again.

The war god got unsteadily to his feet, then seemed to merely shake himself out of the experience of having his head cracked against the ground with the force of twenty rampaging bulls. He cracked the tension out of his neck and simply picked up his sword again.

“Now that we’re properly acquainted,” the war god said, “let’s take this more seriously, shall we?”

He moved quick, quicker than Techno expected. Techno barely managed to parry a blow aimed directly at his heart. Techno thrust out with his trident in retaliation, but the war god simply danced out of the way before returning again in full force. Techno took one of the knives from his bandolier and stabbed out, managing to nick the other god—just barely—before they clashed weapons gain.

Blow for blow, hit for hit. They could have gone on like that for forever. A god of war and a god of blood. In another life, they might have been allies.

Techno tried in vain to remember which of the many people he’d felled over the centuries had belonged to this man, but there were too many—a long line of ghosts he would spend the rest of his immortal life atoning for.

Atoning? the voices laughed. *What is there to atone for? Does a lion atone for killing the gazelle? Does the fire atone for burning?*

Techno jumped backwards and threw his knife, which the war god deflected easily with his sword. He threw another, which the war god dodged. Another, which stuck harmlessly into the earth. Techno reached for another, and found his bandolier empty.

“This is futile,” the war god said. “Just put down your weapons, and maybe—*maybe*—I’ll give you the merciful death you never gave them. You fight and you struggle, but we both know how this ends. Mortals and their bloody games… there can only be one outcome, right?”

“The war isn’t over yet,” Technoblade replied.

The god of war smiled, his eyes drifting to something over Techno’s shoulder. “Are you sure about that?”

Techno looked behind him, his eyes finding Tommy and Wilbur first, crouched underneath a rock. Techno could not bring himself to linger on the look of fear on Tommy’s face as he stared back at him, and so he continued searching the horizon for what had caught the war god’s attention.

His heart—what remained of it—sunk, as he took in the thousands of enemy reinforcements flooding into the Blue Valley.

Tubbo stood in the knee-depth waters of the river that cut through the valley. Once clear, it now ran red with blood. Friend or foe, it didn't seem to matter—they all bled the same.

The river's current was tugging at him. *It's alright,* it seemed to say, *you can let go now.*

And Tubbo wanted to. By gods, he wanted to, more than anything. His quiver was empty of arrows. He'd lost his bow and sword in the chaos. All he had now was a dagger, its blade no longer than his hands and just as frail. His body felt like it had been fighting for weeks, but a glance at the sun high overhead told him it had only been hours.

Hours of senselessly slaughtering his way through the fray. It was better when he still had arrows—when he could stand and shoot at distant enemies without thinking of them as *people*. When he'd resorted to using a sword, when he'd gotten close enough to see the fear in their eyes as his blade pierced through cloth and skin, when the blood had colored him crimson, it was suddenly, frighteningly real.

Once, he had wanted to see their enemies burn. Now, he just wanted it to be over.

Tubbo looked up at the sound of shouting. Before him, enemies were running through the wall of flames, cutting through the fire like one after the other in an unending tide. The words *reinforcements* and *too many* and *retreat* echoed in Tubbo's ears as the breath was knocked out of him.

He tightened his grip on his dagger as the enemy reinforcements advanced, cutting down people who were too weak, too inexperienced, too tired, to fight. People like Tubbo.

They drew closer. An infinite army.

Tubbo felt bile rise in his throat. *Too many, too many, too many*. He felt hot tears slipping down his cheeks. *Too many, too many.* He felt his fear and dread like a physical weight, almost driving him to his knees. *Too many.*

In the end, Tubbo was not a hero. But he raised his dagger anyway.

"It's over," Tommy whispered. He leaned against his brother as they both looked over the valley, at the enemies descending upon their army like a swarm of hawks. The pain in his shoulder was now a distant worry. It wouldn't kill him—but he knew death was coming for him regardless. "We're fucked."

Wilbur was very still.

"Wilbur." Tommy turned to his brother. "You know I love you, right?"

The king gave him a sharp look. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Tommy swallowed thickly, trying—and failing—to keep the tears in. “I—I love you. I don’t think I ever said it, but it’s true. I figured, if it’s my last chance—”

“This is not your last chance,” Wilbur snapped, his eyes darkening. He whirled around, facing Technoblade, who still stood between them and the mysterious soldier. “*Techno*!”

Techno glanced back at Wilbur, his expression shuttered. He did not look at Tommy.

“It’s time,” Wilbur called out.

For a moment, Techno only stared. And then, slowly, deliberately, he nodded. “I’m sorry, Wilbur.”

“What?” Tommy demanded. “What are you two talking about?”

Wilbur did not reply. He wasn’t even listening.

Tommy could only watch as Wilbur unhooked a blowing horn from his side. He put it up to his lips mechanically, his eyes blank and staring at nothing at all.

“Wilbur?” Tommy begged. “Wilbur, what’s going—”

Wilbur blew the horn.

She heard it. They all did. Heads snapped up at the sound of a war horn echoing through the valley—a low, sad sound like the beginnings of a funeral dirge, or the cry of a lone bird separated from its flock.

The flower shopkeeper met the eyes of a woman across the field. A stranger, only familiar from brief, inconsequential meetings at the camp. But in that moment, they were kindred spirits, united in their determination. The shopkeeper nodded. The woman gave her a solemn salute. It was now or never.

The shopkeeper glanced at the oncoming horde of enemies, butchering all that stood in their way. But the Royal Army was not fighting anymore. No, they were running. They threw down their weapons and ran back in the direction of the hill, stumbling over weeds and irises and vines of morning glories. The Green Army—outnumbering them ten to one—gave chase, unaware of what was coming.

The shopkeeper took off, the rock in her pocket seeming to grow heavier with every step. But unlike the others, she was headed north, up one of craggy mountains that bordered the valley.

She knew the others—at least those who weren’t dead already—must be headed towards the other mountain, crashing through the trees and underbrush as she was. There were fifty of them in total, but only two of them were really needed for the job.

“If you lose heart,” the king had said during the midnight meeting where he’d laid out his plans to the volunteers, “just make sure someone else still has theirs. This a last resort—but it might also be our only choice.”

He'd told them all they were free to leave. None of them had.

The rest of camp had all been told two things: "When you hear the horn, run for your life," and "Don't tell Prince Tommy."

The shopkeeper bounded over boulders and overgrowth, her heartbeat thundering in her ears.

"*Hey*!"

She risked a glance back, and found three Green Army soldiers running after her. They were less used to the terrain than she was—she'd walked this path a million times over the past week—but they were gaining on her quick, their swords raised and ready.

The shopkeeper kept running. But her knees were screaming, her lungs on the verge of collapse. She was tired. So, *so* tired—

A yell came from behind her. She tried to ignore it, until it came again. She glanced behind her once more, stopping dead in her tracks when she realized what was happening. One of the enemy soldiers was on the ground, a small dagger embedded into the nape of his neck. The other two were doubling back, facing the attacker that must have followed them up into the forest.

She caught sight of brown hair, a small frame. *Oh, gods*.

It was the boy who'd lied his way into the army, and had fought bravely in it until the very end. The shopkeeper glanced behind her, to the cave where her main objective was. She was so close.

But the boy, she saw, was unarmed.

The decision was already made. She ran back down the mountain, her axe in her hand. The soldiers had cornered the boy against a tree, their blades ready to cut his life at seventeen years. But that meant that their backs were to her, and they never saw her coming.

"Just pretend you're chopping down a tree," the general had taught them during their training phase at the castle. "The axe will get the job done, but it'll take a few swings."

It only took her two: one through the neck, the other into the skull. The two soldiers dropped dead at her feet. The boy stared up at her, breathing heavily, his face streaked with blood and dirt. It looked as if he had aged fifty years in a day. The shopkeeper no longer recognized the young, foolhardy boy who'd run around camp doing the most menial chores, grinning from ear to ear, taking pride in being part of something bigger than himself. He was battered and bruised and bleeding, with eyes so haunted the shopkeeper couldn't help but wonder about all the things he'd seen since the sun rose over the battlefield.

What has the world done to you? she thought. But all she said was, "Are you alright?"

The boy could only nod wordlessly.

“You need to get out of here,” she said hurriedly, already hearing more soldiers coming up the mountain. “Here. Take this.”

She shoved her axe into his hands. The boy shook his head vigorously. “I can’t,” he croaked. “You need to protect yourself—”

She gave him a bitter smile. “Trust me, kid, you need it more than I do. Now, go. You know your orders. Back to the camp. Follow the sun.” Before she could think better of it, she pulled the boy into her arms, hugging him tightly. For a moment, he could only stand in listless surprise. And then she felt his arms close around her. He buried his head into her shoulder and let out a single gut-wrenching sob.

When the shopkeeper let go, there was a new spark in the boy’s eyes, faint, but better than nothing.

The boy turned to go, but lingered at the tree line. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Niki,” she said. “My name is Niki.”

“I’ll see you later, Niki,” the boy said, and was gone.

She stared after him for a while, her heart feeling lighter in ways she could not explain. But then a twig broke in the distance, heralding the arrival of enemy troops. The shopkeeper steeled herself one last time, and headed for the cave.

Inside, stacked from one end of the cave to another, connected to natural underground caverns that ran the length of the mountain, was the king’s last resort. The only thing that stood between their kingdom and the certain doom.

We will see our enemies burning, the king had promised them on that first day, lifetimes ago.

It wasn’t exactly burning, but blowing them to kingdom come was an acceptable compromise.

The flint was in her hand. All she could smell was sulfur, and the distant scent of irises. Her pursuers were at the mouth of the cave, screaming as they realized what she was about to do. They might have begged. She would never know.

“I’ll see you all in hell,” she said bitterly, and struck the flint into flame.

At the summit of the opposite mountain, in a cave almost identical, the Captain did the same.

“For my kingdom,” she whispered to the empty cave, and let the fire fall.

Niki hoped, at the very least, that they would plant the prettiest flowers over her grave.

The explosions rocked the world. It rattled the very sun from its loyal orbit. Wilbur braced himself against the rock he'd once stood fearlessly on, and watched the mountains fall.

Yes, the voices chorused, *this was always meant to be.*

Wilbur had been here before. He'd dreamt it. He'd lived it. As an avalanche of rocks and earth cascaded into the valley—crushing anyone unfortunate enough to be left behind, friend or foe—Wilbur felt a tug of familiarity at his core. His ears rung from the violence of it all—the voices, the screaming, the blasts that went on and on and on.

Flocks of birds soared up into the sky, disturbed from their perches. They were the only survivors.

When the dust settled, all Wilbur could see was a pile of devastation where the Blue Valley used to be. Their enemies, crushed by the thousands or buried alive on Wilbur's orders. And their allies…

Wilbur bent over the ground, and vomited.

"Wilbur."

Wilbur's ears were still ringing. He heaved the last of his stomach's contents, coughing up blood and spittle. There was no end to it.

"Wilbur."

Wilbur turned, almost afraid of what he would find behind him.

Tommy, his face pale, his eyes wide and staring, as if he had never seen Wilbur before.

"Tommy," Wilbur croaked. *Stop looking at me like that. Look away. Look away. Look away.*

"What…" Tommy's voice was so small. "What the *fuck* did you just do?"

"What the fuck did he do?" the war god demanded. He tried moving towards the king and the prince, but Techno was there, forever blocking his way.

"Don't take another step." Techno raised his trident, its prongs aimed towards the war god's chest. "Your army is gone. There is nothing left to fight for."

"You *bastard*," the god growled, his obsidian sword trembling in his grip. "You think this hurts me? I died years ago."

Techno took a deep breath. His hands still reeked of sulfur.

"Come, then," he said, exhaustedly. *Blood for the blood god.* "I shall kill you again."

The war god jumped towards him, starting the cycle anew.

“You said ‘no more secrets.’” Tommy’s nails dug bloody crescents into his palm. “You *promised*, Wilbur.”

They were all dead. They were *all dead*, because of the man that Tommy couldn’t bear to call his brother. He wanted to dig into his skin and rip out every part that was Wilbur’s. He wanted to gut himself, tear it all apart from the inside out, if that was what it took to the get rid of the screaming in his head.

Wilbur wasn’t meeting his eyes. Tommy marched up to him and grabbed him roughly by the collar.

“Fucking *look at me*, you piece of shit!” Tommy screamed. The ground was still shaking, or maybe it was just him. Hot tears spilled down his cheeks, tears of a rage too big for his body. “How long have you been planning this? Was it from the beginning? Did you look our people in the eyes and never bothered telling them you were leading them to the *slaughterhouse*?”

“Some of them had to have survived,” Wilbur whispered, his words almost lost to the winds. “I warned them.”

Tommy shook him violently. “That’s not the fucking point!” he sobbed.

Wilbur finally looked at him, but there was nothing behind his dark eyes. “I did what I had to do, Tommy,” was all he said.

Tommy shoved him viciously away. His hands felt dirty. He felt unclean. In his head, he could still hear the strings of a lonely guitar, playing over the soft laughter of soldiers that were now simply… gone. *Gone* in a flash, between one breath and the next. It had come so easily to Wilbur.

Would it come easily to Tommy, too?

“You fucked up,” Tommy spat. “You *fucked up*, Wilbur.”

“Tommy—” Wilbur reached out for him, but Tommy flinched back.

“Don’t fucking touch me!”

In battle, when two opponents were evenly matched—in strength, in wisdom, in anger—it would only take one thing to bring it all down. One soldier. One mistake. One move.

The war god had seen his fair share of battles, and had won all of them, except one. The only battle to matter, and he’d lost everything, because a blood god had decided to throw his lot in with the opposing forces. *One soldier.* Afterwards, the war god had dragged himself through the battlefield, his throat burning from screaming his lover’s name into the quiet sky. When he’d found him, the war god had crawled towards his broken body, curling around it as if he could somehow warm it back to life, and he had stayed there for years, letting the moss and the weeds grow over the two of them. He would have stayed there forever, beside the carcass

rotted down to the bones, but a fire had grown inside him, a fire that would not be satiated until he had the head of the god that taken everything from him.

Now here he was, facing off against the very culprit. It was a bloody dance. The war god slashed and the blood god parried. The blood god lunged and the war god ducked. Like the push and pull of the tides, drawn to each other by a gravity of violence.

But all the war god needed, he knew, was a single chance. He would not waste it.

"Don't fucking touch me!"

The words were the high-pitched shriek of a frightened child. A familiar sound on a battlefield, indistinguishable from every scream that came before it.

But the blood god turned towards it, leaving his defenses completely open. *One mistake.*

The war god raised his sword high above his head. It was very difficult to kill a god, but not impossible. In the right hands—like the hands of a warrior with fire in his heart and carnage in his smile—it would only take one blow.

Goodbye, blood god, he thought. *My vengeance is complete.*

Technoblade turned instinctively at Tommy's scream, just in time to see Tommy draw back from Wilbur's reaching hands. Pain flashed across Wilbur's face, but he was otherwise unscathed. Both of them were safe. No knives in their backs, no arrows through their throat.

A shadow fell over Technoblade, and by the time he remembered where he was, it was too late.

Technoblade turned and faced the tip of a bloody sword, a breath away from his face. But it was not the war god's obsidian blade, coming to reap his soul. It was a familiar silver broadsword, pierced right through the war god's chest.

Technoblade could only stare as war god looked down at the blade embedded straight through his heart, his sword arm still raised in what would have been a killing blow. Instead, the obsidian sword fell harmlessly out of his limp hold and onto the dirt, and the war god followed close behind.

Behind him stood a winged man, his golden hair catching the rays of the setting sun.

No, the voices screamed. *Not you. Not you. Not you.*

"Hello, Techno," said Philza.

Wilbur saw him first. Perhaps that was how it was always meant to be. Some part of him would always, unfailingly, be looking for him. Tommy followed a beat later.

Wilbur saw his brother's shoulders go slack, like a marionette with its strings suddenly cut. "Dad…?"

Their father was standing before Techno and the unmoving body of the white-cloaked soldier. At the sound of Tommy's voice, he turned, and looked at his sons for the first time in a decade.

And so he enters the scene once more, the voices whispered.

And before Wilbur could say anything, Tommy was already running.

One move. That was all it would take.

On the ground beside him was one of the blood god's throwing knives, lost during their battle. With the last of his strength, he curled his fingers around the hilt. His love was calling him home. He could hear it in the warm wind. But he could not face him before he was avenged. And so with all he had left, the war god aimed.

And threw.

Dad. His father was here. His dad, standing among the blue irises the same shade as his sad eyes. The years fell away like smoke, and Tommy was a boy again. There was no explosion. There was no war. There was no leaving. There was only a son, and his father.

Tommy felt a hysterical laugh bubble out of him as he ran, even as his cheeks still stung with tears. There was everything. There was confusion, there was grief, there was anger, there was relief, there was disbelief, there was joy—

"Dad!" Tommy shouted, spreading his arms wide as he ran, like a bird about to take flight.

"Tommy." Dad's smile was still the same, after all these years. He opened his arms, welcoming Tommy into an embrace. "My boy. You've grown so much."

—and then there was pain, as the knife found its mark in the prince's heart.

Techno watched Tommy fall backwards, impossibly slow. It took a moment for the reality to sink in, and by then, Wilbur was screaming, screaming so loud it drowned out everything else, even the voices that began screeching inside Techno's head.

"Tommy!" Philza shouted, running towards Tommy's unmoving body, but Wilbur was already there, cradling his brother to his chest. Techno could only watch, utterly numb, utterly cold, utterly lost inside his own head.

No, no, no, no, no—This couldn't be happening. This could *not* be happening. It was over. The war was *over*. He'd done everything he could to protect them, to protect Tommy. Why was this still how it ended?

“That is what it feels,” someone gasped, “to lose everything.”

By the time Techno turned towards the war god, ready to rip him limb from fucking limb, he was dead, a smile on his face. *Fuck you,* Techno thought furiously, *fuck you fuck you fuck you —*

“Techno!” Wilbur’s scream brought him violently back into his body, with the force of a comet crashing into earth. *“Help me!”*

Techno staggered towards them, his blood as heavy as lead, his vision hazy. But he could see the one thing that mattered. His Tommy, lying so still in his brother’s arms. His Tommy, who braided his hair with sweet-smelling flowers. His Tommy, who was quick to anger but quicker to laugh. His Tommy.

The sun was setting over the Blue Valley.

There was a terrible, terrible silence—the kind of silence that always came before something devastating. The calm before the storm. Tommy had always hated silences. It gave his mind too many spaces to fill with darkness. So he brought light, instead. Noise and laughter and jokes and jibes, anything to keep the quiet at bay.

Wilbur had helped with the weight, like he promised, but now it was back, pressing against Tommy’s chest, suffocating him under its burden. There was pain. So much pain. He thought he’d already felt pain, but what did he truly know? He was only fifteen.

Tommy felt himself lifted into someone’s arms. The arms of the man that had snuffed out the lives of two armies in one fell swoop. Tommy wanted to push him away again, to spit his anger and his disgust, but he was too weak to do either. He could only lie there, staring up at his brother’s face, twisted with anguish. His mouth was moving, speaking words Tommy could barely hear.

Let me go, Tommy wanted to say. *Give me back to the ground.*

But then Wilbur started humming. It was a song. *The* song. The song Tommy had been humming just this morning, lifetimes ago.

“What…?” Tommy breathed, the rest of the question dying on his lips. He couldn’t keep his eyes open. He should. He knew he should, because otherwise he’d be—

“Your lullaby,” Wilbur sobbed, his tears hitting Tommy’s cheeks. “It’s the lullaby I used to play for you on my guitar, when you were younger.” And just like that, everything that came before was forgiven and forgotten and

—gone. But was that such a bad thing? Rest would be nice. If it meant his lungs would stop hurting. If it meant his chest would stop aching. Sleep. Sleep was good. Sleep was—“I miss your music, Wilbur.”

Tommy could feel someone stroking back his hair, so gently. So lovingly. “Keep your eyes open, Tommy.” *Techno*. “Keep your godsdamned eyes open.”

—bad. He needed to keep awake. Techno was telling him to, and Tommy always did what Techno said. Because Techno was his tutor, his teacher. His big brother. “I would have…” Tommy coughed. He felt blood trickle down his jaw, and then nothing at all. “I would have liked to hear you play together again.”

Wilbur’s hold on him tightened. Somewhere far away, someone was screaming for a medic, and Tommy knew. Tommy knew it was—

“We’ll play for you,” Techno vowed. “When we get home, we’ll play for you as many times as you want, Tommy. I’ll let you beat me when we spar. I’ll let you braid my hair, or even cut it all off if you want to. Anything you want, just keep your eyes open.”

A shadow fell over them, in the shape of wings that Tommy had only seen once before, when he had flown out of Tommy’s bedroom window and out of their lives forever. Or, not forever. Tommy tried to raise his head, to see his father’s face, but the pain was too much.

“*Dad,*” Tommy whispered. He still wanted to do so much. He still wanted to scream at Wilbur and then embrace him. He still wanted to find flowers for Techno’s hair. He still wanted to go home, to the kingdom that they had protected. He still wanted to hug his dad.

But a darkness was quickly gathering.

“Tommy?” Tommy had no idea who had said his name. It all sounded so very far away.

“Don’t leave me,” Tommy begged. “Please. I’m so scared.”

“We’re here, Tommy.” A kiss on his forehead. Someone holding his hand. Strong arms around him. Wilbur, humming his old lullaby. Warmth, even in the dark. “We’ll always be here.”

—*too late.*

“Thank you,” Tommy breathed. “Thank you. I…” He had so much left to say, so much left to offer. Love. Forgiveness. Cheer. But he would leave it there, until he woke up again.

Tommy’s eyes drifted shut.

His mother’s laughter had never sounded clearer.

Somewhere in the distance, the Green God began to smile.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I hope this chapter was worth the wait! Thank you for reading, as always, and all your kind comments that keep pushing me forwards! If you wanna come yell at me, i'm here on twitter (https://twitter.com/thcscus) :D

i listened to the pigstep remix on a loop while writing this lmao ALSO SORRY FOR THE MISTAKES I MAY HAVE MISSED WHILE EDITING ill go through them after the chapter's up! just wanted to give you guys a little something before valentines :)

pushing the spear into your side (again and again and again)

Chapter Summary

Dead. He's dead. He's dead and gone forever. The voices were screaming, clawing against the walls that Techno had set around them and had tried to maintain for years. All for Wilbur. All for Tommy. Now one of them was dead, and the other was dying—there was no doubt about it. Wilbur would not survive this. And neither would Techno.

//

Or, conversations, counting sins, and coming to terms with the cost of being a brother

Chapter Notes

this is just 7.6k words of characters working through grief and yelling at each other about it so this chapter's content/trigger warnings are as follows:
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-
-
-
-
death, depictions of grief

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He first held Tommy in a sunlit room.

He had come earlier than expected was such a small thing, so much smaller than his brother had been. The midwives had told them there was a chance they could lose him within the hour, and his wife had cradled the newborn against her chest, sobbing against his pale skin.

"My baby," she'd cried, "my little fighter. Be brave, Tommy, be strong."

But Tommy was so still in his mother's arms.

Philza had stood at her bedside, watching her coo and cry at a baby that did not stir. He had lived a million lives, and all its miseries combined could not compare to the pain of being a mourner at his son's birth-bed. And as the minutes churned on, heedless of the growing abyss inside his chest, he found that he could not even cry. It was a sadness too big for tears, a grief too infinite to measure.

And when his wife had offered the baby to him, to give him his chance at saying goodbye despite her own despair, Philza did something that he would never forgive himself for. He hesitated.

He looked at the silent bundle in her arms, dead before he could even live, and felt the fracture in his heart grow. This was the fate of humanity, eventually. It did not matter if Tommy lived to the next year, the next decade or the next breath, he would still one day die. Bitter and numb and hateful of the world, Philza wondered if it were better that Tommy died now, before Phil could grow to love him more. People mourned the beauty of a wilting rose, but an unblooming bud would give a quieter heartache.

But Tommy wasn't a flower. He was Tommy. He was Phil's *son*, and he loved him now as much as he could love him later, though *later* might never come. But his arms were made of stone. They would not rise, as much as he willed them to. If he held Tommy now, he knew he would never let go. He would follow his baby to his grave.

And then there *he* was, sneaking past the guards and the midwives, passing under a grieving god's notice. He climbed up into bed, smiling at his mother, apparently oblivious—or immune, as often starry-eyed children were—to the anguish that coated the very air of the room.

"Is this my brother?" Wilbur asked, leaning over the baby in his mother's arms. "May I hold him, mother?"

A lump formed in Phil's throat. He turned away before Wilbur could catch sight of his face, and when he turned back around, Wilbur had Tommy in the gentle crook of his arms. The sunlight slanted over them, and Phil wanted to remember them like that forever: his two beautiful sons, immortalized in gold. Wilbur's earth-brown curls hid his expression as he bent over the baby, murmuring something Phil almost didn't catch.

And the baby began to cry.

Wilbur pulled back, astonished, his face drawn in awe. "What is it?" he asked frantically. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," Phil sobbed, falling to his knees before the three of them—his lovely, laughing wife, his kind, bewildered Wilbur, and his loud, shrieking Tommy. "You did everything right, my boy. You're perfect."

Now Wilbur held his brother—a baby no longer, but still so, so small—to his chest as they walked through the quiet, empty camp. Wilbur spoke the words he'd first spoken to his brother all those years before, over and over, like an enchantment or a prayer to bring him back to life once more.

"I will love you forever, I will love you forever, I will love you forever."

But this time, Tommy did not wake up.

And Philza was still made of stone.

He walked the ruins alone. Night had fallen, but the moon and stars were hidden by heavy clouds, cloaking the earth in darkness. The sky itself was in mourning.

Tubbo moved through the gloom, the torch in his hand creating shadows that seemed to reach out towards him like helpless ghosts. He stepped mindlessly over the rubble, his feet meeting dirt and stone, and sometimes the flesh of a fallen comrade—or an enemy, but did that matter anymore?—that had not been as lucky as him. His ears were still ringing from the explosion, and his bones felt like a house of cards one whisper away from collapsing, but he was alive. He was *alive*, when all the others were not.

When the dust had settled and the survivors had come crawling out of the wreckage, Tubbo had counted. They had been warned, of course. They had heard the king's signal and ran as fast as they could, but not all of them were fast enough.

The Royal Army had left the capital city with twenty thousand soldiers.

In the end, only eight hundred remained.

Not all of them had been lost to the explosion. Most had already been dead by the time the mountains fell, slain by enemies and their cavalry. But the smell of sulfur still hung in the air like an accusation, following Tubbo as he made his rounds. He was meant to be looking for other survivors, but Tubbo had come to know a thing or two about lost causes. He could walk this valley for days, and all he'd find were the broken remains of two armies—a mass grave that would honor no one. In a century, people would walk this land again and see only green hills blooming with blue flowers.

The prince was dead. That was what they were saying. Killed in the final moments of the war—its last casualty. A month ago, Tubbo had watched the prince laugh on a balcony, his face lit from within. Now there was no light left anywhere.

Overhead, the clouds broke open, and the heavens began to weep.

It was raining outside. Techno could hear raindrops pounding against the roof of the tent and creeping through the cracks. But the boundless cold he felt was from something else entirely.

He'd collapsed on the ground the moment they'd entered the tent, shivering with his arms around his knees, unable to feel anything beyond the relentless chill. It felt as if his bloodstream had frozen over, with brutal icicles stabbing into him from the inside out. And when he'd tried to duck his head into the dark embrace of his arms, a single blue petal had fallen against his skin.

No. He'd ran his hands roughly through his hair, pulling pink strands out from the roots in his desperation to remove the last of the morning glories out of the tangles of his braid. Blood flowed from the places where his fingernails scraped against his scalp, but Techno found that he didn't care. He *couldn't* care. The whole world could burn around him, and all he would be thinking about were the flowers still caught in his hair, their saccharine scent like poison in his lungs.

He clutched the flowers in his hands, bloodstained and trembling, and threw them as far across the room as he could, where they landed at the feet of the king.

Wilbur sat at the cot his brother slept—*used to sleep*—in, clutching the broken boy to his chest. He was rocking back and forth, muttering words Techno could not comprehend as he pushed the hair back from Tommy's pale, unmoving face.

Dead. He's dead. He's dead and gone forever. The voices were screaming, clawing against the walls that Techno had set around them and had tried to maintain for years. All for Wilbur. All for Tommy. Now one of them was dead, and the other was dying—there was no doubt about it. Wilbur would not survive this. And neither would Techno.

Blood, the voices demanded, *blood for the blood god*.

His hands curled into fists, so tightly his nails broke the skin of his palm. Blood trickled down his hands, but it would not be enough. He wanted a massacre. He wanted violent vengeance. And there was nothing and no one on the other side of his anger. All their enemies were dead. There was nowhere to go, but inward.

Techno's knife was still lodged in Tommy's chest, in Tommy's heart.

Your fault, the voices began. *Blood follows you everywhere you go. Did you think you could outrun it?*

He thought he had. By gods, for once in his damned life, he thought he'd finally found somewhere safe. Somewhere where no one knew his bloody past, or cared to. Somewhere with clear skies and a warm garden where he could pretend to be something he could never be. *Mortal*. And now it all came crashing down around him. His farce. His naivete. This was the cost of those halcyon days.

He should have left the first chance he got. He should never have met them at all.

"Wilbur." The name scratched his throat. He could barely hear himself speak. He tried again, putting as much strength in his words as there was left in him. *"Wilbur*. Let him go."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Philza raise his head from his silent seat in the corner. He had not said a word since his arrival, not even as they marched back to the tent with Tommy's dead body between them. For once, Techno was glad for his silence. If he heard Philza's voice right now, he might just put his trident through the man's chest.

Techno struggled to his feet when it was clear Wilbur was not listening to him. His legs threatened to collapse under his own weight, and he caught himself on the edge of the planning table, where carved wooden soldiers still stood at attention for a war that was already over. *It's all over*.

"We need to fix him up, Wilbur," Techno said, his words coming out ragged.

He staggered towards Wilbur, hand outstretched. Wilbur's head snapped up at the sudden motion, his eyes wide and furious.

“Get away from us,” he growled, pressing Tommy closer against himself. The movement made Tommy’s head loll to the side, allowing Techno to truly see his face in the candlelight for the first time.

Techno’s breath hitched in his throat. Tommy looked so… peaceful. As if he was simply sleeping. As if any moment now, his eyes would flutter open and he’d grin up at the both of them, easily diffusing the tension as only Tommy could.

Wake up, Techno begged, prayed, wished. *Please wake up*.

But he never would again.

“You can’t hold him forever,” Techno spat. “For gods’ sake, Wilbur, there’s still a *dagger* in his chest.”

Wilbur looked down at the still bundle in his arms, noticing the state of his brother for the first time. Absently, mechanically, he reached out to wipe a streak of dirt from Tommy’s cheek. His expression grew incensed as the stubborn soil clung ferociously to his brother’s skin, and Techno feared he might just wipe Tommy’s flesh down to the bone.

“Are you trying to *peel him*?” Techno demanded angrily.

Wilbur looked up at him with a look of unbridled wrath, but did not reply.

With a scoff, Techno took a stray piece of cloth hanging off the table and marched to the tent flaps. He drew them open and leaned out into the rain, catching the cold raindrops with the cloth until it was damp. Cold water slipped down his wrist, but it was a distant feeling, felt by another man, in another time.

When he turned back to them, Wilbur was still clinging to Tommy like a lifeline.

“Let him go,” Techno ordered.

Wilbur shook his head silently, his shoulders trembling. “I can’t.”

“Wilbur—”

“I said, *I can’t*.”

Techno stomped towards him until he was standing over Wilbur. “Of course you can. It’s easy. Just open your damn arms and put him on the bed.”

Wilbur glared. “It *would* be easy for you, wouldn’t it?”

Techno narrowed his eyes at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Cold. Everything was cold. Cold in his lungs, cold in his heart, cold in the very depths of his soul—if he still had one. Cold from the rain, cold from the Tommy’s skin, cold from Wilbur’s damning eyes.

Thunder cracked in the distance. It was going to be a long night.

It's easy, he'd said. *Just open your damn arms.*

Wilbur didn't know if he wanted to laugh or wail at Techno's words. There was nothing easy about anything anymore. Every breath left like inhaling broken glass, every thought was a raging shriek. There was blood in his mouth from where he'd bitten the inside of his cheek just to keep himself from screaming. And by gods did he want to scream. He wanted to tear the whole world apart with his bare hands—burn and salt it, leave nothing behind, not even one whisper of what once was. It did not deserve even the memory of Tommy.

"You heard me," Wilbur hissed at the man standing before him, both of them glowering but not truly seeing each other. "Everything comes easy to you, doesn't it, *blood god*?"

Techno's brows drew together in anger. "You don't get to throw that back in my face. Not tonight. Not after everything I did for you."

Wilbur's arms trembled. He looked down at his brother's sleeping face—*sleeping? Sleeping? He isn't sleeping. He's dead. Dead.* With a rattling breath, Wilbur traced the curve of Tommy's cheek, stopping where it used to dimple when he smiled. And then Wilbur looked down, at where a knife still jutted out of his chest like a violent reminder. Fresh tears stung his eyes, and he tried desperately to blink them away before they could fall. And still a rebel tear found its way down his face, carving his dirty cheek in half.

Death. Such a small word for such a big thing.

Wilbur hadn't even wanted Tommy on the battlefield in the first place. He had planned to leave Tommy at the castle, where he would be safe behind walls and his own personal army of guards. But Techno—godsdamned Techno—had talked him out of it.

"Tommy is stronger than you'd like to admit," Techno had said. "And smarter than anyone gives him credit for. And if you leave him behind, you will not only lose an irreplaceable asset, you will also lose your brother's love. Don't stand there and tell me that Tommy will allow you to fight this war without him. What will you do when he inevitably protests? Lock him in his bedroom? Shackle him to the wall? You tried to protect him once before, and look where that got you."

And so Wilbur had taken his brother to the frontlines, ordered the tailors to make him a uniform that Wilbur would have killed to never see him wear, and then he'd sent his brother —his baby brother, his Tommy—off to the slaughter.

And now he was dead. Dead in the red-and-blue colors of the family that failed him one last time.

No, the voices hissed, *not your family.*

Wilbur met Techno's eyes once more. "This is your fault."

And Techno was right, in the end. It was damnably easy for Wilbur to stand, open his arms and place Tommy down on the cot. Before, his body had moved on its own, but this time, every action was deliberate. Deliberately, he shrugged of his torn and bloody coat and put it over Tommy, to keep him warm—if warmth was something dead bodies still felt. Deliberately, he tucked a loose strand of Tommy's hair behind his ear. Deliberately, Wilbur let his brother go. Deliberately, he turned and faced Technoblade.

Anger, it seemed, was a stronger emotion than sorrow.

Technoblade's eyes were gleaming in the flickering candlelight. He still held a wet cloth in his hand, but he clutched it so fiercely Wilbur would not be surprised if it was merely shreds by now.

"Be very careful," Techno drawled, "of what you're about to say to me, Wilbur."

"You told me to bring him here." Wilbur flung the accusation like an arrow from a bow, watching it strike its mark. "And *you* were their target. We're all just collateral fucking damage for all the shit you've done. The past caught up to you, Technoblade. Why the hell did you have to bring us all down with you?"

Thunder crashed around them like vicious war drums, followed by a flash of lightning that bathed everything in a ghastly glow. Technoblade and Wilbur stared at each other across the flower-strewn gap that grew between them with every word. They were two ghosts in limbo. Twin stars drawn to each other's collapsing gravities.

They were going to destroy each other tonight.

And Wilbur was going to enjoy every damn minute of it.

"I told you," Technoblade growled. "I told you I would take care of them, didn't I? I could have stopped this at the border, but you wanted to play the peaceful dignitary even when the bloody facts were staring you right in the face."

Wilbur remembered that day clearly—the day the first of the spies' reports had come in, confirming what the voices had been whispering tauntingly for weeks. Wilbur, as always, had called for Technoblade's advice. And Technoblade had read the missives once, looked up, and simply said, "I could kill them all."

Wilbur had flinched. "Techno, that's not—"

"I could. You know I could." Technoblade had leaned over his desk, meeting Wilbur's incredulous stare with hazy eyes. "Just say the word."

Wilbur had not. They'd argued, like they'd never argued before, like they were arguing now. And Technoblade had left, slamming the doors of Wilbur's office with such force it rattled the books off his shelves.

And then not even a day later, the Green Army had massacred an entire city at the borders.

Had Technoblade been right then? Was Technoblade right now? Wilbur found it didn't matter. He didn't care. All he wanted was to rip and tear. His fury would not discriminate.

"Ah, Technoblade." Wilbur shook his head ruefully. "Always choosing violence, at every turn."

Technoblade inhaled slowly. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, don't I?" Wilbur watched Technoblade's features twist in surprise and grim anticipation, quickly hidden by a veneer of indifference. Did he know what was coming? Did he fear it as much as Wilbur was eager to twist the knife? "Tommy didn't know about where you go off to on your little nighttime escapades. But I do," Wilbur finally said, finding a grim sort of delight in the way Techno froze on the spot. "Did you think I wouldn't notice? Did you think I wouldn't ask questions or *follow* you?"

"You're an idiot, Wilbur," Techno said, his words nothing less than venomous.

Wilbur only smiled in the face of his fury. "Did you at least have fun murdering your way through the woodlands, Techno?"

He'd been seventeen when he found out. In truth, he didn't even know how he'd arrived at that forest. It was exactly like the first time he'd ever seen Techno leave, all those years ago, when the raging voices had followed him into the darkness and he'd woken up somewhere with no recollection of who he'd gotten there. But all of his confusion had been quickly replaced with fear as he spotted Techno moving between the trees, stalking after something crawling across the forest floor. Or, not something. Some*one*.

Wilbur had pressed himself against the trunk of a tree, his hands clamped over his mouth, barely able to breathe as Techno's prey begged for his life. And then he'd heard the distinct sound of a sword being freed from its scabbard. One scream, and then a wet thud. That was all, before Wilbur passed out once more. When he awoke, he was in his own bed at the castle, his heart thudding in his chest but completely unharmed. He'd taken a deep breath, glad to brush it all off as a nightmare, before he noticed the single green leaf clutched in his hand.

He'd never spoken of it—until now.

"Go on then," Wilbur said as Technoblade simply stared at him, breathing heavily. "Tell me you've changed. Tell me I don't know what I'm talking about. Tell me you aren't the same bloodthirsty god from the stories."

"I expected you, of all people, to understand." Technoblade's voice sounded strained, like a taut rope one pull away from unravelling. "You know the voices—they don't let go. They demand their fill, Wilbur, and sometimes it's unstoppable. But I've been trying so godsdamned *hard*." There it was. The crack—a hairline fracture slowly fissuring into something more. "If you really were following me, you'd know I haven't killed anyone for *years* before today. I stopped. I fought the voices off, even if it took *everything* from me. You think you got me pegged, Wilbur? All you needed to define me by was you, and Tommy. But go ahead and find other definitions if that will make you happy. Let's see if I still have anything left in me to care."

That made Wilbur pause, if only for a second. “Then where have you been going…?”

“Looking for your father,” Technoblade spat, and the words fell between them like a dead weight.

Wilbur turned towards the man in question, but his father had not moved in ages, stuck sitting with his head in his hands, oblivious to the thunderstorm around him. Not one word, not one move. *Of course,* he thought bitterly, taking in his father’s slumped shoulders and the obsidian wings tucked close around him. *Why would I expect anything different?* Wilbur wanted to feel angry at him, wanted his vision to go red every time he caught a glimpse of his father’s golden hair in his periphery. But he only had his pity. Wilbur had not seen his father in years, but looking at him now, he didn’t see the cold, distant king of the past. He only saw a pathetic excuse of a man, someone who’d abandoned his sons, who only returned after all the hard decisions had been made. After *Wilbur* had been forced to make them. He didn’t want to spare a single thought more on the laughable sight of his father sitting leagues away from his Tommy’s body, not even bothering to meet the eyes of the only son he had left.

“That’s right,” Techno said roughly, catching Wilbur’s attention once more. The blood god stood with his fists clenched at his sides, trembling with fury. Wilbur had never seen his eyes so hateful, not even when he was carving his way through the battlefield. Wilbur reveled in it. “I went out, every night, for years, ignoring the voices, ignoring everything, to look for *your* father. To give him back to you. Because I saw you. Every meal you missed, every hour you spent studying politics instead of sleeping, every time you felt you were choking, I saw it. I was *there* for it, and it killed me, so I went off to look for someone to help you. I tried telling you I’ve changed. I only bite when my family’s in danger, but you still see me as some sort of rabid dog. And those people I *did* kill in the forests? They were criminals, Wilbur—”

“As if that changes anything.”

“Tell that to the army you just blew into smithereens!”

“*You* set those explosives!”

“And *you* gave the order. So where does that leave us?”

For a moment, they simply stood there, staring at each other, and catching their breaths. The storm still raged outside, but some bit of it was living inside Wilbur’s chest.

This was the endgame. Wilbur knew they were standing on a precipice—if one of them jumped now, they were lost to each other forever. And so Wilbur leapt.

“Maybe it was better Tommy died before he found out what you are,” he said slowly. Deliberately. “You must be happy. At least now, he’ll never get the chance to know just what sort of *monster* you truly are—”

Technoblade moved in a flash. Wilbur had anticipated it, but still couldn’t help a gasp of surprise as Techno barreled into him, sending both of them sprawling on the ground. Wilbur’s head cracked against the packed earth, but the sting was a welcome one. Technoblade kneeled over him, his fists curled around the collar of Wilbur’s shirt. Wilbur could feel

Technoblade's anger radiating from him like heat from a raging forest fire, but when he looked into his old tutor's eyes, he could only see his own wretched smile reflected back at him.

Technoblade pulled one fist back, his entire body trembling.

"Go ahead," Wilbur said. "Prove me right."

There was a split second where Wilbur thought Technoblade would simply leave, like Wilbur had always known he would, eventually. And then his fist collided with Wilbur's face.

There was a sickening crunch and a lancing pain, and Wilbur knew from the amount of warm blood that dripped down the side of his face that Technoblade had broken his nose.

Wilbur leaned back, looking up at Technoblade with wide eyes. Technoblade stared back at him with equal shock, the anger briefly ebbing from his face to reveal a genuine worry.

"I—" Technoblade began, but Wilbur cut him off with a derisive snort.

"That all you got, blood god?" he said, and promptly kicked Technoblade off him.

Technoblade went flying, and crashed against the cot right behind him. Wilbur's breath caught as he watched the cot tremble, and then collapse.

"No!" Technoblade reached his arms out, but he wasn't fast enough.

Tommy's limp body fell to the floor with a hollow thud.

For a moment, all was quiet. There was only the distant rumble of thunder, so far away now, as Technoblade and Wilbur simply stared at Tommy's body lying in the dirt before them, like abandoned refuse, like a toy—once-loved, now broken—discarded by a careless toddler's fickle hands.

He hated himself for it, but his first instinct was to search the room for his father. He met his father's eyes as the old king slowly rose from his seat, his mouth a thin line of disapproval. *Always disapproval*, the voices hissed. *Even now. Especially now*.

Wilbur wrenched his gaze away from his father's, only to be met with Technoblade's, his pale face a study in grief.

"What the hell did we just do?" Technoblade whispered, almost too quiet to be heard over the pounding rain.

But Wilbur was already rushing to his feet. Before Technoblade could say another word, Wilbur ran.

"Don't."

The warning was soft, but brooked no argument. Techno stopped at the edge of the tent where he'd been readying to chase after Wilbur, turning towards the sound of Philza's voice.

Philza had gathered Tommy's body into his arms, but he was looking right at Techno.

"He needs his space," Phil continued, his blue eyes almost gray in the dim light.

How would you know? Techno wanted to say, but his gaze fell and caught on Tommy. What was left of his anger evaporated into mist as he took in the state of his br—his pupil. The blood and mud still on his skin and clothes, the dagger still protruding from his small, unbreathing chest. Phil held the boy with infinite gentleness, Tommy's head nestled against the crook of his arm, Tommy's cheek pressed against his chest—exactly like how one would hold a newborn babe. Techno wondered when the last time Phil had held Tommy like that—if Tommy even allowed him to over the age of three—and realized it did not really matter. A father's arms never forgot the shape of a child.

Not that Techno knew anything about being a father. Or being a son.

Techno nodded begrudgingly at Philza. "And we need to clean Tommy."

Phil looked down at the body in his arms, his expression cloudy. "I suppose we should."

They moved quietly, carefully. Techno grabbed the cloth he'd dropped during his tussle with Wilbur and went to wet it in the rain again, lingering in the cold to let the raindrops wash away the blood on his knuckles. Wilbur's blood. His stomach tightened as bloodstained water dripped from his hands, but in a few moments, his hands were clean once more. When he turned back to Tommy and Phil, he'd found that Phil had taken the knife from Tommy's chest.

"Is this yours?" Phil asked bitterly, running his hand over the knife's carved handle.

"You should know," Techno said. "You gave it to me."

Phil looked up in surprise. Techno could only shrug, unsure of where they stood now with each other.

"It was a long time ago," Techno said. "You gave me a whole set."

"During the—"

"Yes," Techno cut him off. "During that time."

For the first time, Phil seemed to look his age: ancient and weathered by his endless years. Techno could see him remembering it all: their empire of blood and glory, broken only by silent months of warm companionship. It seemed their bodies recalled just as much as their minds did, because they slipped easily into their grim work, side-by-side, never needing to speak a single word. As Phil combed the dirt out of Tommy's hair, Techno scrubbed at the stains on his arms and the stubborn one of his cheek. And when Techno's breathing began to slow at the sight of the jagged wound on Tommy's chest, Phil silently worked Tommy out of his torn shirt and into a fresh one that did not bear the scars of their battle.

Then they stepped back, surveying their work. Tommy was polished. Tommy was spotless.

Tommy was dead.

Of all the things that could have broken him, Techno didn't understand why it had to be the sight of Tommy actually looking *clean*. He'd held it together when they were walking back to camp, he'd held it together when Wilbur pinned him with accusations that simply echoed what the voices had been saying for years. *Monster, monster, monster*. He'd killed a thousand men, seen allies eviscerated and witnessed the fall of kingdoms. He'd seen Philza kneel. He'd seen the world end a hundred times over and watched its people rebuild it over and over while he stood back, helpless, wanting to scream at them for being foolish but also yearning, with all his might, to be able to love something enough to also love what grew from its ruins.

And looking at Tommy's peaceful face was what finally, *finally*, made Technoblade—emperor of ice, blood god, destroyer of worlds—cry.

He stood over Tommy's body, and let the tears fall. He felt himself come undone with grief and guilt, misery and madness. And all at once he understood. He understood the anguish in the war god's eyes. He understood the pain of the widows and orphans he'd left in his wake. He understood the agony of an entire world brought to its knees before a merciless god—and he felt it all.

A hand closed around his trembling shoulder.

"Techno." Philza's voice was a distant thing. "We need to talk."

"Talk?" Techno whirled around, shrugging Philza's hand off his shoulder. The other god simply backed away, giving Techno his space. Techno hated that almost as much as the blank look on Philza's face. "What is there to talk about?"

"About—" Philza swallowed, leaning against the table as if he could not bear his own weight any longer. "About why I left."

"Your son is dead." The words tasted like ash on his tongue. "His corpse is *right in front of you*, and you want to talk about yourself?"

Philza flinched, but that was the extent of his reaction. "This is important. You have to understand—"

"What is there left for me to understand?"

"It's not over." Philza's eyes bore through him. "The war isn't over."

Techno exhaled heavily. "Don't screw with me right now. I'm done. I'm *finished*."

"Would it help," Philza said slowly, "if I told you the leader of the Green Army—its general, its ruler, whatever—is still out there?"

Techno blinked, hot tears still stinging his eyes. *"What?"*

Philza's lips drew into a thin line—a habit Techno recognized from their empire days as something Philza did when he was trying not to scream. "I left for a thousand different reasons, Techno. When my—when *she* died, I just knew. Though the pain of losing her was more than I could bear, I knew something worse would come. And it did come—sooner than I expected, but it came." He glanced at Tommy, his expression undecipherable. "Her death destroyed me. But I knew the day I lost my sons would be the day I destroyed the world." His eyes slid to Techno. "You understand that, I think."

"I do." Technoblade did not want to agree with him on anything, but there was no other explanation for the voices slowly getting louder and louder inside his head. He was beginning to lose himself. He already had, if he'd hurt Wilbur like that. It had only been a few hours. There was no telling what he could do—what he would become—later. He stared at Philza, for once realizing that the Angel of Death might be called that for a reason.

"We gods are different. Our grief is infinite, but so is our power." Philza looked down at his hands. "No being should have both. Grief, in a mortal, already does so much fucking damage. In us, it will be a thousand times worse. So I did the only thing I felt could save me—save everyone—from my grief." Blue eyes found red. "Have you heard of the Green God, Technoblade?"

Techno found himself nodding. The Green God. An infamous force, but a mystery to all. Technoblade had found the name carved into trees older than civilization, and written into the mortals' holy texts.

Philza smiled. "The Green God could bring him back."

The rest of the world fell away.

And in its place, hope.

"That's why…" A single tear—the last of its kind, the last Techno could give—fell down Techno's cheek, warm and light. "That's why you aren't breaking down right now."

"Oh." Philza gave him a sad smile. "Believe me, old friend, I am completely losing it. I just had more practice at hiding it than you. Knowing I can revive my son doesn't do shit for the pain of seeing him die in the first place."

"And your wife…?"

That sobered Philza quickly. "I don't know. The texts I read—and there were millions—had conflicting stories about the Green God's rules. What he can and can't do. They all agree he's powerful. Even more powerful than you and me combined, I reckon. But he can bring back Tommy, and right now that's the only thing that matters."

Techno was quiet for a moment, simply processing the weight of Philza's revelation.

Then he said, "Couldn't you have said all that *before* I broke Wilbur's face?"

Philza grimaced. "I'm sorry. I was… well, losing it, as I said. You know me."

Techno nodded. “I do know you. Always gone in the aftermath, aren’t you?”

“Techno—”

“You could have stayed to explain,” Techno said quietly. “Or you could have taken me with you.”

They both knew he wasn’t talking about just Tommy anymore.

Philza shook his head sadly. “What gave me the strength to leave the night my wife died, Techno, was the knowledge that you were staying behind. I’d seen what you were becoming to the boys, and what the boys were becoming to you. I knew I could leave, because they had you.”

“But who did *I* have, Phil?” Techno demanded.

Philza’s eyes widened. “Techno, that’s—”

“*Me and you*,” Techno went on, not hearing anything beyond the pounding of his own heart. “That’s what you said. So where were you when I was crashing through an entire library’s worth of books on history and politics and *godsdamned etiquette* just to fit in in a life I never asked for? Where were you when Tommy was waking up from nightmares almost every night, or when Wilbur was pulling his hair out over being king at *sixteen*? Where were you when the voices got so loud for the both of us that we had to take turns reminding each other to breathe?”

There was a sharp crack, startling both Techno and Philza. They looked down at that table Philza had been leaning on, only to find a chunk of it had broken clean off in Philza’s hand.

“Oh.” Philza stared uncomprehendingly at the cracked pieces in his hand. “That’s—” He looked helplessly at Techno. “What do I do now?”

Technoblade crossed his arms. “Apologize, for one thing.”

“For the table or for leaving?” At Technoblade’s unimpressed look, Philza winced. “Sorry. That was… my awful attempt at humor, I suppose.” He took a deep breath, dropping the broken pieces from his hand. “I know I have a lot to be sorry for,” he began.

Techno sighed. “There’s going to a *‘but’* now, isn’t there?”

“But,” Philza continued, meeting Techno’s disappointed stare head-on, something close to sadness flickering over his face, “we have the rest of our lives for my atonement. I will apologize to you every minute of every day, once this is all over. I will never stop trying to make it up to you, but it will have to wait once we’re safe. Once we’re *all* home.” He glanced pointedly at Tommy, then back at Techno. “Like I said, this war isn’t over. The Green God is still out there. This was simply his invitation.”

“An *invitation*?” Techno thought about the thousands of corpses—enemy and ally—buried underneath the rubble of exploded mountains. His trident and whip, still slick with blood. What had the war god said? *I’m merely a pawn in this game*. “Is this all a joke to him?”

Philza nodded tightly. “He’s more god than the both of us.”

“You calling me a mortal, Philza?”

“That depends.” Philza smiled gently. “Do you still think it’s an insult?”

Techno did not reply. Instead, he turned towards the front of tent, to the rain still raging outside.

“Someone needs to find Wilbur.”

Philza found him at the very edge of the hill, kneeling over a cluster of blue flowers, the rain pouring over his shoulders. He seemed numb to the cold—to everything entirely—but when Philza spread his wings over him, keeping the downpour away, his dark eyes flickered to his father, just for a second. Just for a heartbeat. But it was acknowledgement, which was more than Phil could ever hope to deserve.

Techno’s words echoed in his head, each syllable leaving bleeding wounds that Phil would never show. Techno had already suffered so much. Too much. Phil would rather die than add to that. Whatever apology he could come up with now would be meaningless—a small, pathetic scratch against an iceberg of his own making. Actions, after all, spoke louder than words, and Philza was nothing if not a man of action. *King at sixteen*, Techno had said, as if it was the worst thing to be.

Now, looking down at his son, Philza knew it to be true.

Wilbur was holding his own hand in his lap. In the dark, Phil could just barely make out a jagged, barely-healed scar on his palm. He wanted to ask a million things at once—*are you okay who did that what happened will you ever forgive me forgive me forgive me forgive me* —but he held his silence, even if it was the second-most painful thing he had ever done.

He waited.

And waited.

He would wait until the world ended, if that was what it took.

And then, eventually, Wilbur spoke. “It really was meant to be.”

“I’m sorry?” Phil asked gently.

“Yeah.” Wilbur sighed heavily. “You should be.”

“Wil—”

“Why didn’t you visit?” Wilbur asked suddenly. Overhead, lightning arched across the midnight sky, and Phil finally allowed himself to look—*really* look—at his son. His jaw was sharper, his shoulders broader, but underneath the blood and grime and the haunted eyes, it was still his boy. His Wilbur, terrified of the dark. “Or even write a letter? Anything?”

Philza's heart shattered. "Because if I did, if I allowed myself that foot in the door, I knew I wouldn't have had the courage to leave again."

"And did you ever think of us?"

"Of course. Every second of every day."

"I never thought of you," Wilbur said. "Or, at least, I tried not to. It was hard. I saw you everywhere. In the paintings, in the garden, down every hallway. In Tommy's eyes. In Techno's words." He closed his scarred hand, so tightly that the wound opened once more, spilling blood onto the grass. "But what's strange is that I never saw you in me."

Thunder echoed over the valley, but Philza barely heard it. "I think that's a good thing, Wilbur."

"No." Wilbur gave a rueful shake of his head. "No, it's not. I'm tired of pretending it is. I'm tired of everything. I wish I could be just like you and leave it all behind without looking back."

That was enough. Philza went and kneeled before Wilbur, his hands finding Wilbur's shoulders. Wilbur's expression crumpled, and Philza knew it wasn't just rain dripping down his cheeks.

"Leaving you and Tommy," Philza said, "almost killed me, Wilbur. But I knew I had to, to spare you from exactly this." He shook him slightly, desperately, just to get any sort of emotion behind those cold brown eyes. "We can bring him back, Wilbur. This isn't the end."

He told Wilbur of his plans, of the years he'd spent hunting down every lead and every whisper of the Green God who could rewrite history, rewind death itself.

"I know," Philza said. "I know this doesn't absolve me of the things I've done—leaving you, when your mother had just… I thought I was protecting you from my world, but I should've understood earlier. You *are* my world. You and Techno and Tommy. And after this, after the Green God gives us your brother back, we can go home together. And you can be Prince Wilbur again, if you want. Or we could go somewhere else, find a place nobody knows our names and just *be*."

For a while, Wilbur was silent again.

Speak, Philza begged. *Please talk to me.*

At last, Wilbur said, "You know, children don't really care about *why* their parents leave. They only care that they *did*. It's a blessing, I suppose, that I never truly was a child, even when I was young." He nodded once, almost to himself. "And how sure are you that the Green God will give us anything? After all he's done?"

"Because I'll make him," the Angel of Death vowed.

Wilbur scoffed. "Right. Techno told me about you, you know. Well, I guess *you* told me about Techno first, with your bedtime stories. Every time I prayed to the gods, I've only ever

been praying to you. I'm not much of a pious man now." Wilbur gave him a ghost of a smile. "But I suppose faith is stronger when tested, right?"

Before Philza could say anything, Wilbur threw his arms around his father, pulling him into an embrace. Philza stilled, a frozen, unmoving statue in his son's arms. And then he cracked. He leaned into Wilbur, his own arms going around Wilbur and pulling him close. He still remembered the last time Wilbur had allowed himself to be hugged like this by his father. He was older now, and heavier, but that would never matter. Phil had never forgotten his initial hesitation at holding Tommy; that shame would follow him forever. But after that, he'd promised to hold his sons for as long as they would let him. And he had sworn never to be the first one to let go.

Phil had spent nine years, ten months, three days and sixteen hours away from his eldest son. And now, in the rain and in the dark where nobody could see him cry, he was finally home.

Wilbur buried his face in his father's shoulder, clinging on for dear life. "This isn't forgiveness," he whispered.

"I know," Philza whispered back.

"And you have a hell of a lot more explaining to do."

"I know."

"And when we get Tommy back, you'll have to bend over backwards to appease him. That boy holds grudges longer than I do."

"I know, Wilbur, I know."

Phil felt Wilbur nod against him. "Then that's where we'll start."

When they returned, Technoblade was waiting at the mouth of their tent, the light behind him making him barely more than a shadow. In his left hand was a roll of bandages ready for Wilbur's nose. Wilbur found himself grinning, a quip already on his tongue, but was silenced as Techno crossed into the rain and wrapped Wilbur in his arms. Wilbur sunk wordlessly into the god's embrace, and both of them were finally warm.

Forgiveness came easily with brothers, after all.

The Angel of Death looked on quietly. He would not be welcome for this moment, not when there was too much between the three of them still, but he knew someday, he would be again. One day, the four of them would be together in a home full of sunlight. Looking forward to that distant time, Philza finally felt peace.

Inside the tent, a golden-haired prince slept on.

Chapter End Notes

welp folks! i know this chapter was just a lot of talking but dont worry! that just means all action has been stored for the next (and last!) chapter. a lot of loose ends have been tied and that means its no holds barred from here on out >:] thank you all so much for your comments. i read them over and over whenever i need a push and i truly appreciate all of you! thanks for reading <3

my palms and fingers still reek of gasoline (from throwing fuel to the fire)

Chapter Summary

> And on a still and silent night, a different night, over the sounds of hooves rhythmically striking the earth, a king turned to a god and asked, “What do you think death is like?”
> “Why do you ask?”
> “What if he’s… What if it’s kinder to him?”
>
> //
>
> Or, travels, travails, and truth

Chapter Notes

> ((hi niki if ur reading this just wanted to say youre one of my favorite ccs, and your streams always comfort me sm! love from kyle!!)
>
> Keep calm, this isn't the final chapter yet! While working on the finale, it got so long that I decided it would be better for both me and you guys, the readers, if I cut the Grand Finale™ into two: this chapter, and the final chapter coming in a few weeks. That being said, this chapter's content/trigger warnings are as follows:
> -
> -
> -
> -
> manipulation, depictions of violence/aftermaths of violence

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> There would be no grand speeches this time, Tubbo knew. Instead, they formed a grim line like souls waiting at the gates of the underworld—where they would find either judgment or absolution. The only sounds were tired murmurs and quiet thuds as the surviving soldiers of the Royal Army piled what remained of their camp into carts and wagons. Both the wounded and the dead were placed gently on beds of hay, with blankets covering the worse of their injuries, a futile courtesy for an army that had seen worse just the day before. They’d found a few survivors during their search last night, but as Tubbo had feared, there were mostly corpses to carry back. Sometimes not even a whole body. Sometimes, just an arm, a leg. A single strand of hibiscus-pink hair. A wrinkled hand still clutching a bloodstained

broadsword. A few volunteers would stay at the valley to continue the bleak search, but for most of the Royal Army—Tubbo included—it was time to head home.

Home. He'd only left a few weeks before, but he could barely conjure it up in his mind. It seemed to him like everything before the war was a vague, unfamiliar relic preserved behind fogged glass. As much as Tubbo pressed against it, he could only see hazy glimpses of what laid behind: a fractured memory of a quiet town, a small house at the outskirts, his family… He'd left for the war in the middle of the night, with only a hastily-scribbled letter left on his sister's bedside table to explain where he was going, what he wanted to do. *I will protect this kingdom. Protect you.* He wondered if she could still recognize him, when he could no longer recognize himself. Wasn't that what family was for? Weren't they supposed to know him, even if—*especially* if—he felt like a stranger in his own body?

Tubbo tipped his head up to the sky, letting the faint rays of dawn warm his frozen limbs. There had been a terrible storm last night, but the only traces of it today were the dewdrops clinging to grass and the mud slick beneath Tubbo's boots. He shook himself out of his reverie.

There was more work to be done.

There was *always* more to be done.

Slowly, Tubbo weaved around the bustling panoply of people and carts, helping where he could—tying down boxes of supplies, feeding the horses and checking their bridles, re-righting someone's arm sling. Anything that kept him moving. Anything that distracted him from the gnawing feeling in his gut. He looked over his shoulder at the valley behind them, expecting to see a green-clad soldier crawling across the rubble towards him, reanimated by vengeance, but there was nothing but open air and a flock of birds circling lazily overhead. Carrion crows or vultures—it didn't matter which. They would be feasting well today.

Instinctively, Tubbo's eyes found themselves drifting down. And that's when he saw them.

A simple horse-drawn cart, indistinguishable from its neighbors aside from the two people stood over it like mourners at a grave: a king and a general, twins in their misery. Tubbo felt an odd pang in his chest as he realized who exactly was in that cart, who exactly they were saying goodbye to. As Tubbo watched, the king leaned over the cart, as if he was going to pull himself in with his dead. But then he pulled back, his shoulders trembling and his hands deep in his pockets. Tubbo wondered if they were shaking, too. For a moment, it seemed as if the general might reach towards the king, but instead he pulled something from his own pocket and reached into the cart. When he leaned away, his hands were empty and still.

The general nodded at the king, and then they were off, disappearing down the hill and heading north—the opposite direction of home. It might have been a trick of the light, but Tubbo would swear until his deathbed that he saw one of the birds wheel away from its flock, its obsidian wings gleaming as it trailed their two-person procession. But then he blinked, and king, general and bird were gone.

And though Tubbo knew the affairs of royalty were not his to investigate, he found himself walking towards the cart, pulled forward by a gravity he could not ignore. In between one

breath and the next, Tubbo was staring down at the face of a dead prince.

Tubbo had seen as hundred corpses—they'd fallen against him during the battle, or he'd pulled them free from rock and dirt—but few had looked as peaceful as the prince in death. It was almost as if he was sleeping, his mortal wound hidden by his clothes and the red-and-blue coat tucked up to his chin. His head rested against soft hay a shade darker than his own golden hair. Tubbo could almost see himself shaking the prince awake. And the prince would blink drowsiness from his eyes, ask Tubbo who he was, and Tubbo would say, "A friend," and maybe in another life that wouldn't be a lie.

Tubbo's cheeks felt warm. He knew he must be crying. He knew he must be sad. But for whom? Who was he even mourning? His kingdom's prince, yes, but the harsher truth, a stranger. A stranger whose laughter still faintly echoed in Tubbo's head like a half-remembered song from a distant childhood. A stranger who'd gambled his life for his kingdom and lost it a heartbeat away from victory—if this bitter thing could even be called that. A stranger that felt like no stranger at all. *But a stranger nonetheless*, Tubbo reminded himself.

And through a blur of tears, Tubbo saw what the general had left behind, tucked gently behind the prince's ear, like a final offering: a single yellow rose.

It would be a long journey. It had taken the Green Army more than a month to make the same trip, but—as Techno had pointed out—they'd been slowed by their footsoldiers and their sheer numbers. Techno and Wilbur had neither. With the two horses Techno had smuggled from the camp, they could maybe halve the time if they rode like hell, but it still wouldn't be fast enough for Wilbur. Each minute was another where he hadn't saved his brother yet, and each second crashed against him like waves wearing a cliffside down into pebbles and chalk. He was glad he didn't bring a pocket watch with him. Its constant ticking would have driven him to madness.

As if you are not mad already, the voices cooed, but they were almost drowned out by the wind whistling past Wilbur's ears as he spurred his horse on faster, following the pink banner of Techno's hair flying behind him as he rode ahead. He'd tied his hair back in a simple knot; there would be no intricate braids for a long while, no flowers heavy with meaning. Wilbur had come to realize that death wasn't a single yawning chasm, but a collection of small puncture wounds slowly tearing through the mundane.

But he'd fix it. *They* would fix it.

Wilbur had known at once what the Green God had meant by his invitation. There was only one place he could be inviting them to. The place that started it all, the place the voices had whispered about in self-satisfied tones, where the Green Army had first struck: the town at the northern border. It was only fitting that Wilbur's first grand failure would be where he would rewrite the second. The Green God would bring his brother back, and all would be well. The specifics, Wilbur would figure out later. For now, he would ride.

The north was a brutal land. Wilbur had averted his eyes as they passed underneath the shattered points of the mountains that bordered the Blue Valley, but the smell of blood and

sulfur had stayed with him until they broke into the tundra beyond. And then there was simply nothing, just open air and rolling fields of grass caught between the green of life and the fading reds of death. There were no towns, no cities, no travelers to meet them on the overgrown path that only Techno seemed to be able to follow.

They stopped only to rest their horses. Once, with the sun right above them, they'd stopped under the shade of a boulder, leaning against its craggy surface with their shoulders slightly touching. Techno had pulled his shirt over his head to wring the sweat out of it, and Wilbur had caught sight of the bruises and wounds that marred his old friend's wiry body.

"You're staring," Techno accused without turning around to face him.

"Just thinking," replied Wilbur, his gaze catching on a particularly nasty scar running down the length of Techno's spine. "I always thought gods were… invincible. But you're just as breakable as humans, aren't you?"

Techno scoffed, pulling his shirt over his head once more. "Maybe not *'just as*.' A killing blow for you would be a scratch for me."

"So whatever left those scars on you… they were awful, then?"

Techno was silent for a moment. "I've lived a very long life, Wilbur," he finally said, glancing at Wilbur with an indecipherable gleam in his eyes. "Awful things come with the territory."

Wilbur swallowed, unsure of where he wanted to take the conversation, but also unwilling to let go of the vulnerability that Techno so rarely shared. "But gods *can* be killed. Fa—Philza, he killed that war god."

Neither of them missed the tremor in Wilbur's voice as he named his brother's killer, or the hesitation with which he said his father's name, but they both silently elected to ignore it. Techno took a tentative sip out of his water canteen, squinting into the distance as he thought.

"It would take a considerable amount of force to kill a god," Techno said slowly, his brows furrowing. "And your father, Phil—"

"He's that strong, huh?" Wilbur tipped his head back and searched the skies until he found the distant speck of his father hovering overhead, his obsidian wings spread wide. They had not spoken more than a few cautious sentences to each other since the night of his father's return, and Wilbur knew it would be a long time yet before he could look at his face without feeling like he'd been punched in the gut. Wilbur had built stories around the man for years, justifications and explanations and vicious scenes where Wilbur screamed at him until his very lungs gave out. In a way, Wilbur was disappointed, because Philza had turned out to be in the right. He'd left to save his sons, and now his abandonment was outweighed by the fact that he could bring Tommy back. How could Wilbur begrudge him for that? Wouldn't he have done the same?

It was hard to hate someone when you saw sense in their actions. But damn it if Wilbur wasn't going to try his best to anyway.

This isn't forgiveness, he'd told his father. He never added a *'yet.'* Even the mere possibility of absolution, Wilbur thought, was more than Philza deserved.

"I died years ago."

Wilbur shot Techno a confused glance, but Techno was still staring straight ahead, his eyes unseeing.

"That's what the war god said. I think… I think it was easier to kill him, then. I think he let us do it." Techno closed his eyes as a sudden gust of wind blew through the tundra, raising the hairs on the back of Wilbur's neck. "Vengeance is a powerful motivator. But it's like a fire you have to keep feeding, or else it burns out—or burns you." He offered the canteen to Wilbur, who took it and brought it quietly to his own lips. "I think the war god simply ran out of kindling."

"Or maybe he just got tired of tossing shit into the flames."

Techno let out a breathy laugh. "Guess we'll never know." He pushed himself off the rock and began heading towards their grazing horses. "If you keep stalling with dumb questions, we'll reach the border by the time you're dust and bones, and I *really* don't want to be bargaining for two dead people. One's already a hassle."

Wilbur threw the canteen at his head, but Techno caught it out of the air effortlessly without looking back.

"Show-off," Wilbur grumbled, but he was smiling for the first time in what felt like centuries.

This won't last, the voices reminded him as he followed Techno back to their mounts. *This stage is set for a tragedy, prince. This hungry audience will accept nothing else.*

Screw you and your stage, Wilbur thought, catching Techno's eye as the general hauled himself up onto his horse. Once upon a time, Wilbur would have cowered at the echoing threats inside his head. But now he stared right back at the monster, and he refused to be the first to flinch.

And they rode on.

They slept under the stars.

Or, more accurately, Wilbur slept—fitfully, tossing and turning with nightmares. It would be naïve to think he could find peace anywhere, even in the oblivion of sleep. If it had been his call, he would have ridden through the night without pause, but Techno had vehemently vetoed the idea. Wilbur had tried to argue, but Techno was quick to shut him down with, "You are useless to me sleep-deprived."

Over the years, Techno had come to learn that the only way to get a man like Wilbur to concede was to cut deep and cut fast. By the way Wilbur's jaw tightened, Techno knew he'd

hit his mark. He would apologize, but if he were to be honest, he'd do almost anything to get Wilbur to rest. Despite the divinity in his veins, even Techno felt like he was fraying at the edges. He couldn't even begin to imagine what the past weeks had done to a mortal like Wilbur.

Wilbur had begrudgingly slid down from his horse and laid himself on the cold ground of the tundra with a pile of blankets.

"I'll keep first watch," Techno said, knowing he wouldn't wake Wilbur until dawn.

Wilbur nodded, knowing the same. And by the time Techno heard the telltale signs of a winged god's descent, Wilbur was asleep.

Techno spared Philza a glance as he settled himself against a pile of their supplies. His blonde hair was wind-tossed and his clothes ruffled, but for a man who'd spent the day closer to the sun than the highest-soaring birds could even fathom, there was relatively nothing out of place. Except his eyes. Techno had never seen a god more weary—but, then again, he hadn't looked at a mirror in a while.

"Already thinking about leaving again?" Techno mused.

Philza tore his gaze away from Wilbur's sleeping form. "No," was his simple reply.

Techno stared at the man before him, wishing he could believe him. Philza sighed as he sat down on the grass, crossing his legs under himself. For a while, there was only the howling of the winds to fill the silence and the distant squawk of a bird on the hunt.

And then Philza said, "What was he like?"

Techno looked up from where he'd been idly pulling at the grass beside him, but Philza was looking at Wilbur again, his expression unreadable in the dim moonlight. Wilbur's face was a pale thing, and under that pile of blankets, it was as if he wasn't even breathing. Techno looked quickly away.

"What do you mean?" Techno prompted when Philza seemed content to just stare at his son until morning.

Blinking slowly, Philza amended, "Tommy—what was Tommy like when he was growing up?"

Techno's nails dug into the dirt. Neither Techno nor Wilbur had spoken Tommy's name. Philza hadn't spoken at all—mostly because he was determined to keep as much distance as possible between him and Wilbur, but for whose benefit, Techno didn't know. But now the name sat between them, as heavy as a curse, as hopeful as a prayer.

Techno turned Philza's question over, treading the line between the truth and what he wanted to say. There was not much overlap. His sons' childhood was a luxury Philza had squandered away the moment he wrote that pathetic excuse of a goodbye letter, and it would take more

than a few weepy conversations during a storm to crawl back into Wilbur and Techno's good graces.

Eventually, Techno shrugged. "Tommy was Tommy."

Philza nodded as if he understood enough. But how could he? He'd left when Tommy was six and returned just in time to watch Tommy die. Tommy had lived a life—however short—between those two points. Philza didn't know petty, petulant, passionate Tommy. Brave, bold, belligerent Tommy. He hadn't been there to watch Tommy grow up, hadn't been there to teach Tommy how. That was all Wilbur. And Techno.

"He was…" Techno pulled a fistful of grass from the earth and tossed it lazily into the air. The wind picked up and blew it all north. Techno thought his words over until the grass leaves disappeared into the night. "He was loved. That's the only thing you need to know."

Philza tipped his head up to the stars and Techno turned away before the first of the tears could fall.

"Thank you, Techno."

And they rode on.

And on a still and silent night, a different night, over the sounds of hooves rhythmically striking the earth, a king turned to a god and asked, "What do you think death is like?"

"Why do you ask?"

"What if he's… What if it's kinder to him?" For a moment, the king was a child again—clumsy and terrified. Every shadow was an enemy and every heartbeat his last. "What if it's better than this?"

And the god looked up at the blue-and-purple sky, stars chasing each other through the dark like a billion wayward children, with only the distant snow-capped mountains in the horizon as a reminder of his earth-bound fate. With the sweet air in his lungs and the steady trot of his steed, the god could almost see himself drifting between galaxies, wandering but, for once, not alone.

"Wilbur," said the god, "there's nothing better than this."

And they rode on.

The days turned into weeks, and Philza watched from the skies as the tundra changed from alpine to polar. Green to white. Grass to snow. Cold to colder.

They were getting close, and it was getting harder to breathe.

Wilbur and Techno had let their horses go the moment the ground turned slippery, and were now slowly making their way through the frozen wasteland, with Wilbur bundled in fur and fleece. It became clear immediately that Wilbur was going to slow them down. He staggered after Techno, who stopped every few miles to let the young king catch up before he moved again. Left to their own devices, Philza knew he and Techno could finish the journey faster—but if Phil knew that, then surely Wilbur did, too. And although this angry, grieving man was almost a stranger to him, Philza could almost picture Wilbur gritting his teeth as he forced himself to walk faster, walk further—driven by the same stubbornness and frustrated perfectionism that he employed into everything he'd ever done as a boy.

Philza followed them closely, flying lower and lower. If either of them asked, he would tell them it was because the air was getting thinner as they headed further north. But neither of them did, saving Phil the trouble of lying through his teeth.

He'd lost count of how many times he'd caught himself looking at Wilbur, taking in his confident gait and his mess of brown curls and the dark lines under his eyes. He wished Wilbur would look back at least once, even if his stare was cold and hateful, just so Philza knew Wilbur could still see him.

Most days, it felt as if he was mourning two dead sons instead of one.

Techno was already a pink speck in the distance. He'd only just stopped to wait for Wilbur when it happened.

There was a loud *crack* that reminded Philza of breaking bones, and he looked down just in time to watch in horror as Wilbur fell through snow and ice, disappearing into the freezing waters that waited below.

Phil didn't think. One moment, he was in the sky, and the next he was hurtling towards the earth, crashing through the break in the ice that Wilbur had been standing on just a second before. He felt the cold water envelop him, cold as death itself, but he was already searching the darkness for his son. His hands searched, desperate and clawing, following an instinct Philza thought he'd forfeited long ago.

Please, he begged, the chill digging its cruel talons into his skin, *please, please, please, not him, too—*

Phil's fingers closed around a wrist, then a forearm, and then he was swimming upwards towards the faint light above. But Wilbur was so heavy, weighed down by his bulky clothes, and the water was so cold, and Phil was reaching and reaching, and there was no air left in his lungs…

A hand closed around his own, pulling him up the rest of the way. He broke through the surface, gasping, and hoisted Wilbur up onto solid ice before climbing after him.

Phil dragged himself over to where Wilbur was lying, heedless of anything else. He kneeled over his son, who was so pale and so still, his eyes closed—*just like his brother*.

No. Phil grabbed the knife tucked into his boot and began cutting away at Wilbur's wet clothes. The blade slashed through fleece and tore at cloth, and Phil peeled it all away until Wilbur was left only in his drier tunic. *No*. Phil curled his fingers around his opposite hand and began pushing down on Wilbur's chest, following the beat of his own frantic heart. *No*.

"Come on," Phil whispered under his breath, trying to keep count of his desperate compressions but unable to focus on anything but Wilbur's face, his dark hair dusted with white snow. "Come on, Wilbur!"

"—*Philza*." Techno's voice, breaking through the panic. "You're going to break him!"

Eighteen, nineteen, twenty…

"Stay with me, my boy. *Stay with me.*"

… twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven—

A violent gasp tore past Wilbur's lips as his eyes flew open, staring up at the gray sky above, and then he was scrambling onto his side, coughing up water. Trembling, choking on air, but *alive.*

Phil let out a rattling breath as he fell back, feeling like the world had fallen out from under him and then came crashing back, burying him in dirt and ice. *I almost lost him.* The thought came at him like a knife to the chest. He stared down at his trembling hands, at its many scars and callouses, at the small, faded line right at the base of his pinky finger where Wilbur, at two years old, had bit him. He didn't even remember why Wilbur had been so angry at him then—sometimes Phil thought toddlers were menaces driven mostly by their bite-sized fury —but he recalled the look Wilbur had given him when he drew his bloody hand back.

It wasn't fear, exactly, that he would get reprimanded. Even as young as he was, he knew—as all children should—that he was loved enough to be forgiven for anything.

It was regret. Regret that he'd hurt his father, or regret that he didn't bite harder, Philza never knew. It was the same look Wilbur was giving him now. A look that said, *I'm sorry,* and, at the same time, *I would die just to spite you.*

But the only thing Wilbur said out loud was a weak and tremulous, "Father?" before his eyes fluttered close, and he slumped back against the snow, his chest rising and falling softly. Asleep, not dead.

"We have to get him out of the cold."

Philza's eyes slid to Techno. He'd almost forgotten the other god was there, kneeling on the other side of Wilbur. If Phil had not known him for centuries, he would have missed the way Techno's eyes hardened as he wordlessly unclasped his cloak and wrapped it tightly around Wilbur. Techno lifted the sleeping man into his arms, Wilbur's head lolling against his shoulder as he began walking purposefully across the tundra once more, cautious this time of the fickleness of the icy ground. Philza stared after him, his pulse still racing, surprised by the gentleness with which Techno had taken his son from him.

An old conversation rose to the shallows of Philza's memory, between two immortals at the dawn of a new age.

My people needed a leader, not a hunter. And I didn't bring you because—

Because I don't know when to be either.

But this time, Philza did not know which of them the accusation was for.

He looked up into the distance. Somewhere out there, there was a town. In that town, there was a god. A god Philza had sacrificed his sons' love for. A god that had the answers for every question Philza had ever asked himself, even the question of whether it was all worth it. Was it worth Wilbur's anger? Was it worth a childhood Philza could not witness?

And then Phil remembered Tommy, in the precious moments they had before he bled out in his brother's arms. And for him, Phil decided, he would abandon a thousand kingdoms. And if his sons hated him for it, then at least they would be alive to do it. And at least they would have Technoblade.

The Angel of Death rose to his feet.

And they walked on.

They found a cave a short walk later, half-buried in snow but relatively warm inside. Techno set Wilbur down in one corner and piled all the spare furs from their packs on him, while Philza focused on making a fire.

"Well," Techno said, sitting down by Wilbur's feet and leaning against the cave wall, feeling light-headed, "he won't die of hypothermia, at least."

In response, Wilbur sneezed in his sleep.

"Death by common cold isn't off the table, though," Techno amended. "Not exactly going down in a blaze of glory, but I suppose no one really gets the death they want. Or deserve."

When his dry commentary was met only by silence, Techno turned to find Phil leaning over a pile of sticks and cloth. He had a flint in one hand a small knife in the other and was forcefully striking them together, but nothing caught. Phil muttered under his breath as he struck harder, and then the knife slid too far, nicking him. Philza dropped both blade and stone with a curse, cradling his wounded hand to his chest.

Techno raised an eyebrow at his clumsiness. "The long travel finally getting to you, Philza? Thought you'd be used to those by now."

"It's not the travel," Philza said quietly. "You know it's not."

"Maybe," Techno acknowledged, turning his head to stare out of the mouth of the cave. Night was beginning to fall outside, the snow on the ground glowing like molten lava in the light of

the sunset. Techno found himself reaching for the blue sapphire that hung from his ear, absently turning it over between his fingers.

He could feel Philza's eyes on him, but he refused to turn around. After a beat, Techno could hear him picking up the flint and the knife again, striking them against each other so viciously that Techno almost missed his whispered question. "What happened to it?"

"What happened to what?"

Philza hesitated, but eventually clarified, "The emerald I gave you."

"Last time I checked, it was sitting in the bottom of a lake somewhere."

Phil let out a humorless laugh. "I should have expected that."

Finally, Techno turned towards him. "So why didn't you?"

The question seemed to have taken Phil aback. He almost dropped the flint in the hand again, his eyes wide.

"What did you think I would do, Phil?" Techno continued before Phil could even take a breath to answer. "Carry it around with me even after you left? Hang it from my ear like a constant reminder of a friendship twice betrayed?" Techno scoffed at the stricken look on the other god's face. "Don't act as if you're any more sentimental. Should I point out that the emerald *I* gave *you* is glaringly missing from around your royal throat?"

Phil looked down, as if also just realizing that the emerald necklace that was twin to Techno's earring was no longer there. Still looking at the spot where it used to rest, Philza said, "There you go again with your presumptions, Techno."

"My *presumptions?"*

When Philza met his gaze again, his blue eyes blazed like frozen ice lit from within. "You once accused me of holding nothing sacred. I thought after all these years you might have realized." He struck the flint, and fire finally blazed to life in the dark cave. "Wilbur, Tommy, you. *That* is what is sacred to me."

For a while, there was only the flickering of the flames between them, casting shadows against the cold walls and their colder expressions. It brought Techno back to a different time, a different land of ice and snow, but with the same company—

No. Not the same. Never the same, now. Neither of them had aged, but they had both changed irrevocably. Even Techno's hands had almost forgotten the shape of violence. The voices tried, but he remained gentle. Kind. True. A ship with a steady anchor. When he looked at Phil, all he saw was a man who once had that for himself, and was now trying desperately to deserve it again.

Warmth slowly seeped into Techno.

He opened his mouth to answer, to say *something*, be it a comment laden with passive aggression or an apology or a question, he would never know, because at that same moment, something stirred.

"… Techno?" came a groggy, muffled voice.

Wilbur was awake.

"Oh, gods."

Philza watched as Techno practically wilted. Up until that point, Phil had not realized how much tension Techno had truly been holding, but now he sagged with boneless relief against the wall behind him, running a shaky hand through his unbound hair, their conversation—among many things—forgotten.

"You really scared the shit out of me, Wilbur," Techno said as the man in question slowly pulled himself up from under the small mountain of blankets Techno had thrown on top of him.

Wilbur tried to smile, and then the cold air finally hit him at last, turning his grin into a grimace as he pulled a few of the furs tight around himself and sat up, his head sticking up from a bundle of pelts the same color as his chestnut hair—a creature of warmth determined to survive in a frozen wasteland. "Scared the shit out of myself too, if that helps," he quipped.

When he met Phil's eyes, it took all of Phil's willpower not to crawl to him and shake him by the shoulders, either to hug him or to demand if he was alright, if anything hurt, if anything was broken. Phil held himself impossibly still as Wilbur opened his mouth to speak.

Perhaps a thank you? Perhaps acknowledgment? Perhaps another whispered "Father"?

"Do you have any water on you?" Wilbur asked.

Phil would take it. He would take anything.

He reached for his pack and took out one of the canteens he'd filled with fresh water before the land froze over. He tossed it to Wilbur, who snuck a pale hand out of his cocoon of blankets and took a long, hearty swig. When he was done, he tossed the empty canteen back at Philza and retreated against the wall, his eyes shining as he stared into the flickering fire.

"So that was…" Wilbur shook his head ruefully. "That was definitely something."

"Yes," Techno replied drily. "You nearly dying definitely *was* something."

Wilbur shrugged. "Well, we're a day's walk away from the god that can bring me back to life anyway, so I don't think it hardly matters."

"Unless that god doesn't want to." Techno's eyes slid to Phil. "I think it's time we talk about that possibility."

Phil sighed. They'd been dancing around the topic for weeks, but now they were at the threshold, and Phil knew he would only be prolonging the inevitable. A hazy memory rose to the surface: stumbling through the ruins of an old civilization, running his fingers against ancient walls that remained surprisingly free of dust, finding himself inside a library where no living being had walked in eons. Books. A lot of books. Books in languages Philza had not heard spoken since he himself was a young god.

And in between the pages, an answer.

"There were stories, before," Techno began slowly, "of the Green God being afraid of you. But then you said he might even be more powerful than you and I combined."

"Stories." Philza shrugged. "Unreliable little things. But, then again, having power doesn't exempt you from having fears. Even the most fortified wall can fall with a single well-placed blow."

"What does that mean for us?" Wilbur asked.

"It means," Phil said, "that I think I have something the Green God fears, but until we know what that is, we have no choice but to strong-arm our way into getting what we want from him. And to do that, I need you, Techno."

Here it was. The other shoe. The last trick up his sleeve.

"I found a way," Philza said, "for someone to breach the realm of what is possible. An untold power, strength to rival a thousand godly armies. All we need are two gods—one to be its vessel, and the other to be its sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?" Wilbur and Techno said at once, one sounding incredulous, the other simply curious.

"Yes." Despite the fire in front of him, all Phil could feel was a freezing cold. "I need your godhood, Technoblade."

There was a long pause.

And then, Wilbur's voice, sharp as a blade cutting through the silence, "But what will happen to you?"

Philza opened his mouth to answer, then promptly closed it when he realized Wilbur was looking at Techno. The blood god, in turn, looked lost in contemplation. When he finally met Philza's eyes, his expression was as blank and merciless as a bed of fresh snow hiding spikes beneath.

"Will I die?" There was no emotion behind the question, just an objective.

Philza shook his head. "No. At least, I don't think so."

"You don't think so?" Wilbur repeated viciously. "Techno's life is on the line here. Do you think you can give us a better answer than that?"

“Wilbur,” Techno said sharply, “calm yourself. Let the man finish.”

“You won’t die,” Phil said above Wilbur’s protests. “But you will lose everything that makes you divine. Your strength, your invincibility—”

“—my immortality?” Techno finished. “Will I lose that, as well?”

“Yes,” Phil said quietly. “You will.”

“Good,” Technoblade said, stunning even Wilbur into silence. He seemed to consider his words for a few moments before giving a nod, the movement like a hammer slamming down on the final nail in a coffin. “That’s good.”

“How are you so nonchalant about this, Techno?” Wilbur demanded. “How can you sit there and tell me you’re so willing to give up your immortal life?”

Techno scoffed. “Immortal life. That should be an oxymoron.” He looked down at his hands, clenching and unclenching them in his lap. “There is not much living to be done when you’re immortal, Wilbur. I think there comes a point when every person—immortal or otherwise—finally does everything they were meant to do. Everything that comes after is just... additions. The only difference is that mortals get to… *go*. You get to finish your story. Close your book.” He took a deep, rattling breath. “I’ve always envied you for that.”

“Are you done, then?” Wilbur asked, his expression caught between furious indignation and the fear of losing yet another brother. “Do you think you’ve done everything?”

“My life was fulfilled the day I met you and Tommy,” Techno said. “Everything that came after was an epilogue I frankly didn’t deserve. After we get him back, someday—not someday soon, I hope, but someday, I want to get to follow you to wherever finished stories go.”

Wilbur’s eyes shone in the gloom. “Techno, I—” he began, his words barely a whisper.

“But,” Techno cut him off briskly, suddenly rising to his feet, “that’s only our last resort, isn’t it? I don’t have to sacrifice anything until push comes to shove, right?” He gave Philza a pointed look until Phil nodded hesitantly. “Right. Well. I’ll go hunting for dinner. Try not to kill each other while I’m gone.”

And then Wilbur and Philza were alone.

Techno ran. He ran until his lungs were free of smoke and cave and talks of mortality. He ran until he was more blur than man, more air than body. He ran until he fell to his knees in front of the cracked ice that almost claimed the last life Techno gave a shit about. He stared into its dark depths, the shifting waters like a grim invitation.

Technoblade never dies, the voices urged, promised, cursed.

“I guess we’ll have to see,” Technoblade replied, and began to laugh.

Wilbur fell back against the cave wall, staring at the space where Techno had been just moments before. He was familiar with this side of his old tutor, so easily startled in moments of vulnerability, like a newborn fawn just starting to learn about a world capable of hurting it. *My life was fulfilled the day I met you and Tommy.* He'd sounded so sure as he said it. Wilbur wished he could say anything with even the fraction of conviction Techno had. It must feel so light, knowing your story's ending—but Wilbur could spend a thousand years wondering, and he would still feel like he was running out of time.

A boy-king first, and then just a king, and now a brother far from home. Who would he be the day he died? Would he meet death clumsily, slipping into its arms at the age of eighty with his crown askew and his legacy secured? Or would it have to drag him, kicking and screaming, into the dark—frigid water filling his lungs, praying, *Father, Father, save me*, with no one to remember him but two gods and a kingdom without a king?

He did not even know how he would face them, if he returned. Would they understand what he did in the Blue Valley? Would they know it was all for them? Would they care?

King or pariah. There was only one other man who knew what it meant to be both.

"Would you have done it?" Wilbur asked, once again a little boy looking for approval in places he would never find it. "Would you have buried them all in rubble?"

His father stared at him from across the flames, his blue eyes—Tommy's eyes—sparkling in the dim light. "To save you? To save our kingdom?" He shook his head, a conclusion reached. "It is a sign of your goodness that you hesitated. I would not have spared a single thought to it."

"And how did you know if I hesitated?"

"Because I like to think I still know my own son."

"Well, maybe I'm more your son than you think," Wilbur said, "because I didn't hesitate at all."

The voices chuckled. *Little killer king, you've finally grown into your role.*

For a moment, his father only stared at him. Then he said, "I'm sorry."

Wilbur blinked. "What?"

"I'm sorry," his father repeated, his voice cracking like thin ice hiding tumultuous waters beneath. "I'm sorry you had to carry that. I'm sorry I was late. If I had been there with you, I would have pressed that button, just so you didn't have to."

Wilbur felt his chest tighten, like some curious giant was squeezing him between its palms, breaking him open and asking, *What are you made of, little one?*

"It wasn't a button," Wilbur said. "I blew a horn."

Did you now? the voices murmured.

Father looked just as surprised as Wilbur felt. “Right—I… I don’t know why…” He shook his head, as if trying to clear it of cobwebs. “Wil, do you sometimes feel like you’re an echo of something?”

“And not a sound of my own?” Wilbur chuckled darkly. “Every godsdamned day of my life.”

“For what it’s worth,” his father said, “I *am* proud of you, Wilbur. Proud of who you were, and who you are now. That will never be in question.”

“Thank you,” Wilbur replied softly, and meant it.

“I spent your childhood so clouded by worry.” The words rang true in the cave, in Wilbur’s heart. “So afraid, always, that you would be taken from me. I had seen what the world was capable of, and when you began speaking of voices, calling to you—Sometimes I could not even look at you without being absolutely paralyzed by fear.”

And how do I look at you, Wil? Father had once asked.

He’d dismissed the question before, insistent that it was disappointment that wrinkled his father’s brow and tugged his lips into a frown. Now, Wilbur thought, he might be closer to the truth. His father had never been sad because of him. He had been sad *for* him. It was as if Wilbur had been looking through a fog to his childhood, and now it lifted, leaving only clarity.

“But that was my own fault,” Father continued, his eyes shining. *With tears,* Wilbur noted with shock. It was a strange thing, watching a parent cry. Everything was backwards. And yet, everything was just right. “If I ever made you feel inadequate or unwanted or like you disappointed me—Wil, I want you to know you could never do that. I have lived this life for more time than you can comprehend. I have built empires and kingdoms. I have been a warrior, a ruler, a wanderer, an architect. But the greatest title I have ever had the honor of owning was *Father*.” He smiled, even as tears glistened down his cheeks. “Or, as Tommy used to call me, *Dad*.”

“I miss him.” The words broke free, tripping over themselves in their release. Wilbur felt his own eyes growing misty, turning the world into a hazy blur of firelight. Miles and miles away from here, bundled in hay and their family colors, his brother’s body was heading home. But the rest of him lingered. Even in the bleak panic of drowning and freezing, he had been there, telling Wilbur to swim. And when his voice retreated, in its wake had been an immeasurable sadness—but, even then, the sadness was good, as good as Tommy himself had been. It was proof that once, love used to grow in the hollow cavern of Wilbur’s chest. “I miss him so much, Father.”

In the dark, the god they called the Angel of Death said, “I know, Wilbur. As do I.”

When the blood god returned with his cheeks aglow and a pack full of fresh fish hunted from a king-sized hole in the ice, he found a father and a son speaking fondly of times long gone, their laughter soft and their faces bright. For once, there were more things to be said than not, and moments of silence were few and far in between. They ate and drank and toasted to murmured names of the dead and buried. They told stories, as people used to tell stories of an

immortal hunter and a harbinger of death. They spoke of gardens and forests, apple orchards and a woman whose son inherited her hair and eyes and heart. But above all, they spoke of a thunderstorm bottled in a boy, the sun at the center of everything.

And if there were any ghosts that haunted their reminiscence, they kept their silence.

"We're almost there," Techno called out. "It's just over this hill."

He looked back to find Wilbur slowly making his way up the slope. Philza hovered close behind, grimacing every time his son slipped or slid against the snow. Wilbur, in true Wilbur fashion, had decided he did not need any help, blaming his blunders entirely on his new fur-lined cloak and not on his inexperience with maneuvering a frozen incline. If he weren't so sure Wilbur would retaliate with an arrow to his shoulder, Techno would have laughed at his flailing attempts.

Techno leaned against his trident as he watched Wilbur swat away Philza's assistance. But, unlike before, there seemed to be no true heat behind the rejection—just Wilbur being Wilbur. Techno knew the fault lines between them could not be healed overnight, but he had to admit it was nice, having Wilbur not look at his father with murderous intent every time.

Ugh, Techno thought. *When did I get so sentimental?*

If the voices had any comment, they kept it to themselves. In fact, they had been quiet the whole day. It wasn't unusual for Techno to go days—even weeks or months, at some point—without the voices murmuring like nosy neighbors in the back of his mind. But this felt… different. Sinister, somehow. It felt like the smug silence of an opponent that knew it had the winning hand.

"Gods, Wilbur," Techno called out, digging the butt of his trident deeper into the snow, "this entire tundra will have melted before you… before…" The rest of Techno's words trailed off as he felt his trident hit something too hard to be just snow. With a sinking feeling in his gut, Techno looked down at where his trident had struck, slowly moving the snow aside with his weapon, slowly but surely unveiling what was hiding beneath his feet.

"Techno?" Wilbur shouted, getting closer. "Techno, what are you doing?"

"Gods," Techno whispered. "Gods and stars and *shit.*"

Because beneath the snow was a pale face, staring unseeing up at Techno, its expression of wide-eyed terror forever preserved by the cold. His heart hammering in his chest, Techno ran until he crested the hill that overlooked what once was a bustling city but was now something else entirely.

He could hear Wilbur scrambling up the hill behind him. He knew Wilbur would see it eventually. But still Techno turned back around, catching Wilbur by the shoulders before he could realize the full extent of the devastation.

"Wilbur," Techno said solemnly. "I need you to know this isn't your fault."

Wilbur's brows drew together. "I don't—"

"*Listen to me*," Techno demanded in a voice that he had not used on him since they were tutor and pupil. "We're here for one thing, and one thing only, and if anything can get in the way of that—your self-doubt, your fear, your loathing—I suggest you leave them at the door. Right here, right now. Do you understand?"

Wilbur's eyes hardened. "I'm not a child."

"That wasn't my question."

Wilbur shrugged his hands of him and gritted out, "I understand," before marching stoically up the rest of the way.

"How bad is it?" Philza asked quietly as they watched Wilbur reach the crest.

"Fucking bad," was all Techno said in response.

Techno could pinpoint the exact moment Wilbur saw it for himself. He went rigid, his hands curling into fists the only indication that he was not a statue of frozen flesh and bone. When Philza and Techno joined him at the summit, Techno heard his fellow god draw in a breath as he, too, took in the massacre below them. Burned bodies lying in scorched snow. Frostbitten corpses laid in careless piles or tossed against the city walls. Bodies too small to belong to adults. Blood scattered across the white landscape like some errant child had taken a red paintbrush to a blank canvas. Dozens. Hundreds. Thousands. The entire city presented like a gruesome welcome sign.

Without a word, Wilbur slid down the rest of the way, his boots skidding against ice and snow. Phil and Techno exchanged a brief glance before they followed after him, and the three of them made their way through the carnage, none of them speaking or even daring to breathe. Techno had seen his fair share of ruthlessness, but this cut to the bone like nothing else ever had. Perhaps it was the carefully blank look on Wilbur's face, or the way Phil tucked his wings close around himself—maybe remembering a different town, the first of the people he had sworn and failed to protect. Or perhaps it was because, somewhere along the way, their people had become Techno's people, as well. Not soldiers. Not warriors. Just *people.*

It was until they were past the city gates that Wilbur's knees finally buckled, and he fell against a lamppost, retching. Phil was there immediately, rubbing soothing circles on Wilbur's back and whispering words too low for Techno to hear. He was too busy taking in the city. Despite the massacre of its citizens just outside its walls, the city remained immaculate, its cobblestone streets and brick houses untouched. Through an open door, Techno could see a room forever frozen in mundanity: a table laid with now-spoiled food, the chairs pushed away from it as if the family it was meant for simply walked away from it, not knowing they would never return. In fact, there didn't seem to be any sort of disturbance within the city itself. No food carts overturned, no doors thrown off their hinges, no marks on the ground where people could have been dragged. What little snow stuck to the ground bore no signs of violent trespass, just evidence of that the entire city seemed to have willingly went to its slaughter.

What the hell happened here? Techno thought, his hand tightening on his trident, almost snapping it in half.

“All of this,” Wilbur said, staggering to Techno’s side. “All of this, just to get us here?”

“Not us,” said Philza, coming up behind them, “just me. I was getting close to something. Something big. And the Green God called me back.”

Techno let out a bitter bark of laughter. “Philza, don’t tell me we’re supposed to reason with someone who would do *this* just to invite you to his little playdate.”

“We’ve done worse ourselves,” Phil said quietly, making Wilbur freeze.

“To fighters. To *enemies*.”

“You once fought for any cause that would give you an enemy,” reminded Phil, his eyes pinning Techno in place. There was no accusation in them, just truth. “That you would blanch now is proof of how far you’ve come. But in about a few minutes, Techno, I think we’ll need your old heart.”

“I know, I know,” Techno mumbled, turning away from Philza. “Don’t send a mortal for a god’s work.”

“Hey,” Wilbur said weakly, “I’m right here.”

“And we’re so glad to have you here with us,” Techno said wryly.

“Could you say that again without looking constipated?”

Techno shook his head, unwilling to discuss it any further. Wilbur was not meant to be here. Techno had already lost a brother to this war and wasn’t too keen on losing another. But he knew there was no force on earth, mortal or immortal, that could stop Wilbur from standing under this pale-red sky, running a finger over the pommel of the rapier sheathed at his side with every intent to shove it through the heart of the god that killed his baby brother.

In the distance, church bells began to ring.

Philza met Techno’s eyes. “He’s calling.”

Techno nodded, gripping his trident tighter. “And we’re answering.”

They moved as a unit through the dead city, no sound except for the howling of the wind and the insistent toll of the bells. The closer they got to the heart of the city, the more Techno felt like each footstep was not his own. There was a greater gravity, pulling them forwards, giving them no choice but to descend.

And then as he came around a bend, he saw it: a belltower rising towards the sky, its bells still pealing away, and beneath its long shadow, a church of marble with its doors thrown open. *An invitation.*

“It’s not too late to turn back around,” Techno said.

“Yes,” Wilbur said, “it is,” and climbed the stairs to his apotheosis.

What else could Techno do but follow?

They walked into the church, and found him immediately.

He was sitting on a pulpit of marble, his legs dangling over its gilded edge. He was calmly reading a book, eyes leisurely moving across the leather-bound pages. His eyes were the most striking thing about him, an unnatural shade of green that reminded Techno of overripe grapes, sour instead of sweet and rotten to the core. The rest of him was… unremarkable. Save for the fact that he was wearing nothing more than a faded-white tunic and trousers in the freezing cold, he could have passed for a mortal: curly dark-blonde hair tucked behind his ears, hands wrapped in bandages up to the knuckles, and a face that could have been a face Techno passed on the street a million times over without remembering it. No obsidian wings or eyes the color of fresh-drawn blood. A man, not a god.

Philza and Techno exchanged a glance.

Is this really him? the quirk of Techno’s eyebrow asked.

I have no idea, Philza’s shrug replied.

“Green God,” Wilbur said loudly, stepping further into the church. “We have come to demand—”

The man—the god?—raised a finger to silence him, not taking his eyes off his book. Wilbur glanced back at Techno, his face in open disbelief. For a moment, the three of them stood at the threshold, awkwardly shifting from foot to foot as the green-eyed being read on. Then, after a while, he took a deep breath, nodding to himself as he snapped the book closed and finally considered the three of them standing below him.

And then he smiled, and there was no question about what he was. There was nothing kind in him. This was a god, through and through.

“Finally,” he said. “I was beginning to think you’d never show.”

Techno froze.

No. It couldn’t be. It wasn’t possible. It *wasn’t*.

Out of the corner of his eye, Techno could see Wilbur, his mouth agape. He had never seen him so terrified.

“No,” Techno whispered, or maybe he screamed it. “You, too?”

Wilbur slowly nodded, unwilling—or maybe unable—to rip his wide-eyed gaze from the Green God.

Because that voice that came out of the Green God's mouth… It was *the* voice. Singular this time, and not a chorus, but still the same voice that had hounded Techno through the centuries, that had tied him irrevocably to a young prince and his forest fire brother. The voices, he and Wilbur had called them, but in truth it had only ever been one, echoing over and over like words shouted into a chasm.

A voice. The Green God's voice.

Surprise, the voices—the voice—whispered in Techno's head, as the Green God said the same thing out loud: "Surprise."

"What's going on?" Phil demanded, his expression half-worry, half-confusion. "Techno?"

"He's the voice, Phil," Techno whispered, his mouth feeling dry. "All this time, it was *him*. But how…?"

"Oh, that's a long story," the Green God said with a chuckle—the same low, haunting laughter that had taunted and mocked Techno for as long as he could remember. "But first, how are you? You must be weary after all that traveling, especially you, Wilbur. So sad to hear about your brother. Mortal hearts can only take so much hurt." He gave a casual shrug of his shoulders. "Then again, immortal hearts aren't much different, especially if they've been foolishly given to the wrong people. Take the war god, for example. The Angel of Death merely drove a sword through a heart already broken." A flicker of a darker emotion—nameless, fleeting—crossed the Green God's face, before his unnerving smile took center stage once more. "Speaking of the Angel, did you like my invitation, Philza? I spent such a long time drawing it up, but I figured you only deserved the best war, right?"

"Who," Philza began with measured fury, "*the fuck* are you?"

The Green God considered them with a tilt of his head, blonde curls falling over glassy green eyes. "They call me by many names. You know me as the Green God. Others brand me the god of chaos. The Progenitor. He Who Pulls. He Who Watches. All silly little names mortals gave to something beyond their understanding." He placed the book he was reading on the ledge beside him and raised his arms over his head in a languid stretch. "But my friends called me Dream."

The red sunlight streaming through the stained-glass windows fractured over Wilbur's face, painting him in a kaleidoscope of colors as he stumbled over his words—charming King Wilbur, for once rendered speechless. The Green God—Dream—seemed to delight in his fumbling, his smile turning sharper as his gaze found Wilbur.

"Wilbur," Dream said. "I truly commend you for that show with the explosions. You took most of them out in one fell swoop, but I have to admit, if Techno had continued on as he was going, I would've been forced to step in. I suppose I shouldn't have underestimated the great and powerful blood god."

Wilbur shook his head slowly, as if coming out of a daze. "All those people… *all those people*." His voice trembled. "Why? How?"

“Those are two very different questions,” Dream said cheerfully. “So why don’t we start from the very beginning?”

Philza had no idea what was going on. All he knew was that every instinct in his body was telling him to fight, to reach for the sword strapped across his back and draw it against the smiling man at the other end of the aisle. But he also knew that beside him, Wilbur and Techno were standing, transfixed, and it was not his call to make. The two of them were twin students, waiting for answers from a far wiser teacher, and Philza could understand that desperation, that ceaseless drive to find answers by whatever means necessary. He’d found himself lost in that feeling for nearly a decade.

Wilbur and Techno had been waiting for this conversation all their lives, and they hadn’t even known.

Phil was not going to take the chance away from them, no matter how much he wanted to drag them both far away from here. So he stood his ground, and listened.

Dream’s knowing smile seemed to be directed straight at him.

“First things first,” said the Green God, leaning back on his bandaged hands and considering the three of them carefully, “I think you must have noticed this already, even if none of you had the words to name it. This is not the first story told. This is not your first life, nor will it be the last.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Phil saw Wilbur stiffen and Techno jerk forwards. He moved discreetly closer to them, a hand on the pommel of his sword even as his head swam with the Green God’s words.

Dream’s smile only widened. “You are royalty now, but before you were simple soldiers. Sometimes strangers on your own separate journeys. Sometimes rebels against a shared cause. Sometimes, happy. But more often, not.” He gave a soft laugh. “There was one time you were enemies, tearing each other apart until there was nothing left but bones.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Techno demanded, his red eyes blazing, incensed by the very notion of standing on a side where Wilbur was not.

“I’m talking about different plays, Technoblade.” Dream spread his arms wide, as if welcoming them all home. “Different stages, different actors, different scripts—but all the strings lead back to me.”

Philza did not want to believe it. But even as he stood there with his heavy disbelief, his mind raced through all the times he’d felt like ten different people trying to live in one body. *An echo, not a voice.* He thought about all the dreams of finding Wilbur in a dark room, of Tommy standing on a bridge that went on until the very edge of the world, of Techno watching him from an island in the sky—all of them terrified, and too real to be just dreams. If that was true, then Philza’s bones were older than he thought. He had always been dancing to someone else’s song, over and over, and over and over again.

When Wilbur spoke again, his voice was a fractured mess. “So, everything… everything has been you all along?”

“No.” Dream’s expression was full of mocking pity. “Not everything. Just the big things. All the small, intimate details, all the *character*—that was you. To put it bluntly, Wilbur, I may have put those soldiers in your path, but it was still your choice to carve a bloody path through them. It was still you that sounded that horn. Still you that pressed that button.” He shrugged. “If you’re looking for absolution, you won’t find it here.”

“And the voices—the *voice*—”

“Oh, that?” Dream’s grin was laced with venom. “Honestly, I just wanted to screw with you. Had to have *some* fun for myself while I waited in the wings.”

Philza turned to Techno and Wilbur, but they were already looking at each other, their faces a reflection of the other’s. In all the world, they were the only two who could truly understand each other in this. Philza was merely the witness. He’d seen Techno pull his hair out in anger, had seen Wilbur lose weeks of sleep, seen them both unravel at the seams over it. Philza himself had burned through libraries and crypts, looking for an answer, and now it was here, as simple as it was terrible.

The Green God was simply *bored*.

“You’re a monster,” Philza gritted out, his fingernails digging into his palms until they drew blood. “You’re a godsdamned *fucking monster*.”

“Oh, I haven’t even gotten to the worst part!” Dream laughed. “Technoblade.”

Technoblade glared up at him, bloody murder in his eyes.

“You’re the real tragedy here, actually.” At that, Dream dropped down from the pulpit, landing soundlessly on the marble below. Techno and Philza instinctively put themselves between him and Wilbur, but the god simply leaned against the first of the pews, examining them with all the nonchalance of a child finding a curious bug crushed beneath his heels. “I almost let you sit this one out, you know. Almost allowed you a quiet life in the woods with your family.”

Surprise broke through Techno’s fury, but it was Wilbur who spoke up. “His family?”

“Oh, sure. Father, mother, siblings, the whole nine yards.”

“Siblings?” Techno finally croaked.

“Three sisters,” Dream informed him gleefully. “Two brothers. Ah, but then, I changed my mind. Couldn’t waste all that dormant godhood in you. All the gods are major players, but none of the others are as fun to play with as you.”

“What did you do to them?” Techno demanded, stepping forwards. His trident was suddenly in his hands. *“What did you do to my family?”*

“Techno—” Phil warned, or maybe it was Wilbur.

Dream smiled. “The correct question,” he said slowly, “is what *you* did to them.”

Techno lunged.

They crashed against the marble pulpit with enough force to crack it. Techno had a fistful of the Green God’s tunic in his hand and his trident in the other, breathing heavily as dust and chips of marble rained down on them both. He could hear Wilbur and Philza calling his name, but every other noise was drowned out by Dream’s laughter, a sound that had become so familiar to Techno over the years. He had hated it all his life, and now there was a smug-looking face to attach to it.

“I told you!” Dream spat in his face. “I don’t call every action, Technoblade! I present the choices, but *you* make them. I was the voice, but you were always the bloodstained hands!”

I don’t even remember their faces, Techno thought, tightening his hold on the Green God’s shirt until he could hear it begin to tear. *I don’t even know their names*. And yet he was consumed by it—an anger that felt like all his nerves singing at once, demanding the same thing.

Vengeance.

Fractured light slanted over the two gods. The whole world was a broken, miserable thing.

“Why?” Techno hated the despair that bled into his voice, but there was nowhere for else to go. “Why me? Why did you change your mind?”

He tried searching for sympathy in Dream’s face, but all he received was the darkest sort of humor.

“You can search for meaning all you want,” he said. “Turn over every rock and read all the stars in the sky. But the truth is, Techno, you were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“All of us,” Techno growled, “are just helpless insects in your godsdamned web, is that it?”

He thought he might have seen something graver flicker over Dream’s face, but it was gone before Techno could put a name to it. “Not all of you.”

Techno was going to kill him. He was going to put his trident through that wicked little grin and be done with it all.

But then he felt a pair of hands at his shoulders, pulling him back.

“Techno.” Wilbur’s voice, leading him back to his own body like a lighthouse calling a ship to safer shores. “We still need him. He still has to give him back to us.”

“Right,” Dream hummed as Wilbur dragged Techno to his feet. “You still need me, Techno.”

“Don’t you fucking call me that,” Techno spat.

They had him surrounded. He was on the floor, leaning against a broken pulpit. And yet the bastard still looked like he held all the cards.

Because he did. Techno felt himself sag at the realization. Dream had everything, because he still had Tommy.

Dream squinted up at each of them in turn, his eyes finally landing on Philza, who’d drawn his blade. Dream considered the sharp tip pointed straight at him.

“That’s the same sword you killed the war god with, yes?” he asked, calmly, as if they were discussing tea.

Phil didn’t deign to give him an answer. Techno alone recognized that look in Philza’s eyes. Philza had never been haunted by voices, but he demanded blood all the same.

“Did he at least fight well?” Dream continued when it was clear none of them were replying. “He must’ve, if he managed to kill your son.”

“You will listen to me,” Philza said, his voice as cold and lifeless as tundra they’d ridden through. “I do not care about your stories. I do not care about you. But if you have all this power, if you can rewrite history, then you will give me my son back. *Or else*.”

“Or else what?” Dream demanded. “We’ve been down this road before, Philza. You have had a million chances to kill me, to end this loop, but still here we stand. Still at an impasse.”

But that wasn’t quite true, Techno thought. *He makes even the Green God afraid*. Somehow, despite everything, Philza had the upper hand. But one glance at the man told Techno he was just as clueless as he had been in that snow-covered cave.

It was there. The key to everything. Nameless, and out of reach.

What the hell are you, Philza?

“And another thing,” said Dream, slowly getting to his feet. He leaned against the ruined pulpit and considered them all with a strange expression. Giddy, almost. “I only write the histories, Philza, plentiful as they may be. But even I do not have the power to *re*-write them. Once performed, an action cannot be reversed. Once penned, an ending cannot be restored.”

Wilbur stiffened. “What does that mean?”

But a monstrous sort of chill had already settled into Techno’s soul, even before Dream threw his head back and laughed, and said, “It means I can’t bring back the dead. Your brother’s gone. For good.”

How many times, Philza had often wondered, could a heart break before there were too few pieces to make it whole again? He had seen mortals survive the cruelest of fates. They would lose homes and livelihoods and friends and family, and still they would pick themselves up

the next day and soldier on. But there was a breaking point. Philza had witnessed that, too. But when did it come? Was it the second loss, or the third, the sixth? Or did it only take one great tragedy to bring a man to his knees?

Even the most fortified wall can fall with a single well-placed blow. And even the strongest god can fall with a single well-placed heartbreak.

“No.” Philza’s sword nearly slipped from his grip before he tightened his shaking fingers around it once more. “You’re lying. You *must* be.”

“Why would I lie?” Dream asked, his golden hair just shades darker than Tommy’s used to be. “You said it yourself. Resurrecting your son is the only reason you need me. Why would I give that up?”

There was a terrible sound, like the screech of a dying animal. It took Philza a moment to realize it was coming from his own throat. He moved without thinking, without breathing. He raised his sword high over his head and brought it crashing down on the god that had taken the remnants of hope from Philza’s grasp and dashed it against a wall. His blade shattered the marble pulpit, cutting the book the Green God had left on top of it into shreds of leather and paper, but when the dust settled, he found Dream standing unharmed a few paces away, looking unimpressed.

“I hadn’t finished reading that,” Dream complained. “And it was just getting interesting, too.”

And then there was Techno, taking him by the shirt and throwing him through the nearest window with all the force a blood god could muster. He crashed through the stained glass, disappearing into the snow beyond.

Philza and Techno were quick to follow.

They bounded over the shattered glass, not even feeling it cut through their skin, weapons out and ready for the slaughter. This, at least, was familiar. The Angel of Death and the blood god, raining bloody vengeance. This was their role. This was who they were.

Dream had been flung against the wall of a building beside the church, and he sat in the rubble like a king lounging on his throne, his grin as lazy as it was malicious.

“So,” said Dream, “I take it you’re angry with me.”

Philza flew towards him, kicking up cold snow in the violent wake of his wings unfolding. He slammed his foot against the Green God’s chest, reveling in the sickening crunch that came with his head cracking against the debris. His sword was at the god’s throat in an instant, cutting a single red line across the pale skin.

I will enjoy taking you apart, Philza thought. *If I shall spend eternity suffering, then so shall you.*

“I never promised you anything,” Dream said quietly, gazing up at Philza. “All that foolish hope—you’re the one that went searching for it. You saw patterns in the sky and then blame

the stars for your own wrong interpretation." Suddenly, his hands shot out, gripping the blade of Philza's sword so tightly that blood dripped down from his palms. With surprising strength, he pushed the blade down until it was resting against his heart instead. "Go ahead. Tear through me. But I'm not the one who left one son by his mother's deathbed and forced a crown on the other. I'm not that kind of monster."

"He was fifteen," Philza croaked. "He died for your war at *fifteen*."

"And you abandoned Wilbur at fifteen." The Green God sighed wearily. "They grow up so fast, don't they? Pity you were only there for the end." He brightened. "Speaking of Wilbur, I never answered his question, did I? Of how I did all this?"

He let go of Philza's sword to gesture at everything—the empty town, their shattered universe, their strange story.

"I don't care." Philza steadied his shaking hand and prepared to plunge it through the god's heart. After years of fighting, he had figured out exactly where to slice without killing. Death would be too kind a god than this monster deserved.

"Well, you should." Dream laughed. "Look behind you, Philza."

Philza would have cut off an arm before he took orders from him, but there was something in his words that made Phil's blood freeze over. Slowly, without moving his sword away from the Green God's chest, Phil turned.

He saw Techno making his way towards them, his unbound hair falling over his face like a burial shroud. His trident glistened in the dying sunlight as he spun it expectantly in his hand, ready to be Philza's fellow executioner. But then, behind him, standing at the window they'd crashed through, looking numbly out at the scene, was Wilbur.

As Philza watched, still as stone, Wilbur slowly drew his bow. A slender hand reached back into his quiver and produced a single arrow. He nocked it, and aimed.

Straight at Techno.

"Techno!" Philza screamed in warning.

Techno paused, tensing in confusion, and then he followed Phil's frightened eyes back towards the church.

Phil could see Wilbur's hands shaking. His mouth formed a single word in his wide-eyed fear. "Techno?"

"Aw, Wilbur." Dream's voice. The voice that had plagued Philza's sons for years, now plaguing him, too, as he found himself unable to move, or blink, or breathe, or think. "Why the long face?"

Wilbur began to smile.

“Wil?” Techno asked, uncomprehending. There was no world, no universe, no god-written stage, where Wilbur could do this to him. And yet here they were, standing across from each other. Strangers once more.

That was not his brother’s smile.

Those were not his brother’s eyes.

“Wil—” Techno said again. A plea. A prayer. A pardon.

Wilbur let the arrow fly.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I'll see you all in a few weeks for the grand finale :) Comments and kudos are always appreciated and they honestly get me through the long nights of researching and plotting. I've read all of your comments at least thrice tbh! Again, thank you so, so much for reading. I cannot express enough how much the support means to me. As always, I'm @/thcscus on twitter and my DMs are always open <3

the echoing hymn of my fellow passerine (they took to it)

Chapter Summary

There was only one way for this to end.

With trembling hands, Techno raised his trident, and was ready.

//

Or, a single story of multiple happy endings. And some birds are here, too.

Chapter Notes

ALRIGHT HERE WE GO, one last time <3 Thank you so much for your patience and your support. It has been such a journey, and I couldn't have gotten here without you guys. So, for the final time, here are the content/trigger warnings for this chapter (especially IMPORTANT this chapter!!):
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- derealization, themes of derealization and manipulation, graphic depictions of violence, death, panic attacks

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The arrow whistled through the air, steady and sure—just like Techno taught him.

Techno rolled into the snow at the last moment, shaking himself out of his frozen shock before the arrow could punch through his heart. It thudded into the ground somewhere behind him, but Wilbur was already nocking another, aiming before Techno could get to his feet.

“Wilbur!” Techno called out, reaching for him, but there was nothing behind Wilbur’s brown eyes, no clarity or kindness.

Wilbur shot again, and this time it found its mark in Techno’s shoulder. And it hurt. It *hurt*.

Biting back a scream, Techno pulled the arrow free and flipped onto his feet, his shoulder a bloody mess. He stared across the way at his student, his king, his brother, who was climbing

over the window, his expression remaining blank and painless even as the broken glass cut his palms open.

Techno could hear the Green God laughing somewhere behind him, but he kept his eyes on Wilbur as he slung his bow over his shoulder and unsheathed his rapier instead—a mindless marionette. *All the strings lead back to me,* Dream had said. That was how he'd led the cityfolk outside to their deaths with everything else untouched. With a bitter taste in his mouth, Techno wondered how many of the Green Army, too, had been under the Green God's influence, acting on his orders without any choice? His mind raced as he scoured his memories for any blank faces on the battlefield that day at the Blue Valley, any movements that were too unnatural, too controlled. How many innocents had been thrown in his path, and how many had he killed without even knowing it?

And now Wilbur was stalking towards him, graceful in his hunt. Another casualty. Another brother whose blood will be on Technoblade's hands. He'd killed his family once before, the Green God had said. And now he was fated to kill another.

Fate. Such a small word for such a big thing.

There was only one way for this to end.

With trembling hands, Techno raised his trident, and was ready.

Philza turned at the sound of the Green God's laughter. He still had the bastard trapped under the tip of his sword, but they both knew who had truly won.

Dream grinned triumphantly up at him, flashing bloody palms in some sort of placating gesture. As if anything can save him from Philza's wrath now.

"What the fuck did you do to him?" Philza demanded, digging the heel of his boot into the Green God's ribs. *"What have you done to my son?"*

"He's sleepwalking," the Green God said. "Or dreaming. Or acting. Choose whichever explanation hurts least for you. Or whichever will excuse him from the mistakes he is about to commit."

"You've done this before." Philza pressed harder. He would crush him like a twig beneath his foot. He would kick him open like the godsdamned insect he was. "You've—You've *controlled* him before."

"A few times, here and there." Dream shrugged nonchalantly. "But I avoid it as much as I can. It's not very fun inside your son's head, you know. There's a lot of heaviness here." He considered Philza with a small smile. "Most of it concerns you, though I suppose you already know that."

"I could kill you," Philza drawled, a strange calm settling into him. All his anger and grief had fled to a universe far from where he was, leaving nothing in their wake. Philza was the void between stars and the pitch black of the earth's final night. He was the silence after

curtain call and the stillness of a home abandoned. *The day I lost my sons would be the day I destroyed the world,* he'd promised Techno.

And he would start with the god that had taken them from him.

"I could push this sword straight through you and be done with you," he continued, gripping its ancient pommel.

"And with my final breath, I'll take what's left of your son's heart and tear it to shreds," the Green God replied calmly. "Would you risk that? Would you risk his sanity for your own? You've done it before. Do it again." He leaned forward until the tip of Philza's blade tore a hole through his tunic. One swift push and it would tear through skin and bone, too. "Go ahead. Let him be the sacrificial lamb for your own peace of mind. Kill me, and kill him."

Philza stared down the blade at the smiling god. The sword had served him for eons, and it had only failed him once, when it had left the war god enough life in him to carry out one last vengeance. It would not make the same mistake again.

In the distance, he heard Techno call Wilbur's name. But there was no reply.

"You're hesitating, Philza," said the Green God.

"No," said Philza, raising his sword above his head. "I am not."

Wilbur's rapier glinted in the scarlet sunlight as it cut through the air between them, aiming straight for Techno's heart. Techno spun backwards, the rapier grazing his sleeve and missing skin entirely. But the assault continued, fierce and relentless, the calculated movements a product of a decade under Techno's tutelage. There should be pride, Techno knew. He should have been proud to see how far Wilbur had grown, from a spoiled little prince with shaky legs and soft hands to a hardened fighter. But, even from the beginning, he had always taught Wilbur to defend. To protect. Because that was Wilbur's nature, that was who he *was*.

Not this. Even in Techno's worst nightmares, never this.

Techno parried another sharp blow, stumbling backwards over the snowy ground. There was only the sound of steel striking steel and his boots in retreat. Wilbur pushed against Techno's trident, battling for the upper hand, and in that moment, they were close enough for Techno to meet Wilbur's dim eyes. A flicker of recognition, or a spark of surprise—Techno would take anything.

"Wilbur." *Please*. "Wilbur, you have to shake him off. I know you can do it, alright? I taught you how to ignore the voices, and this isn't any different. Ignore his directions and follow *mine*."

For a moment, Techno thought he might have seen something shift behind Wilbur's expression, like lightning behind a dark curtain. But then it was gone, or maybe it had never been there at all. As quick as a goodbye, Wilbur jumped back and then struck out, kicking at Techno. Techno skidded backwards, almost falling over into the frozen ground. He righted

himself just in time to block another savage blow that reverberated down into his bones. But even as he was recovering from the shock of it, Wilbur's hand flashed as he reached into his quiver and produced an arrow, clutching it in his fist and bringing it down into Techno's uninjured shoulder. Techno bit back a scream as it shredded through cloth and skin.

He spun away from Wilbur, breathing heavily. He scarcely had time to pull the arrow out before Wilbur was on him again, raining blow after blow that Techno could only half-heartedly parry. Wilbur was backing him up against the church. Soon, there would be nowhere left to run.

In a desperate attempt to put space between them, Techno swung his trident in an arc. He knew Wilbur would duck harmlessly under it, hopefully giving Techno time to think of better strategies than praying for a miracle, but Wilbur was fast. *Too fast.* He ducked, then sprung up in the same breath. He swung with a careless lethality, this time aiming for Techno's face. It slashed the air a mere inch from his cheek before it drew back once more and then shot point-first towards his eye.

Techno's breath caught in his throat.

Everything was moving too fast, and too slow. He could see the snow melting against Wilbur's cheeks, glistening like tears. He could see the blade heading towards him. He could see himself standing in a pavilion of white marble, ivy and wisteria parting as a young boy with a stubborn jaw and more stubborn heart stepped in. He could see this very maneuver acted out by a wooden sword, guided by his own hand. *When in doubt, Your Highness,* he heard himself saying, *go for the eyes.*

All at once, Technoblade wasn't facing his brother. It was just another opponent. Another threat he had to survive.

And so by instinct, his trident rose, catching the rapier's blade in its prongs and twisting it out of Wilbur's grip. It flew into the air, spinning like a broken compass before it fell harmlessly into the snow a few paces away. Wilbur turned to look at it, his hands empty but already calculating what it would take to be armed once more. He tried reaching for his bow. Techno wouldn't give him the chance.

With the butt of his trident—a gift, once, but just a weapon now—Techno struck at Wilbur's chest, sending him crashing to the ground. And then his trident was at Wilbur's throat, tipping his chin up towards his reckoning.

"Are you coming back to me yet?" Techno demanded, the words scratching his throat as he said them.

And for the first time, Wilbur replied. "*Techno*," he breathed. His eyes softened with understanding, and then panic as the world slowly righted itself. "Techno, gods, why am I on the ground?"

Relief burned through Techno as he met Wilbur's clear eyes. Relief, and shame. Shame that it had taken just a few moments of fear to return him to that bloody battlefield that he thought he had abandoned long ago. Shame that he had, even for a second, forgotten Wilbur's face.

Shame that after all his talk of change and redemption, there were still some days where violence was the only place he could run to. He was tired of it, and yet it was all he had. If a father's arms never forgot the shape of a child, then Techno's hands might always remember the shape of his curled fists. The thought terrified him almost as much as the look on Wilbur's face did.

"Did you hit me?" Wilbur asked quietly, looking up at Techno through wet lashes. "I don't remember… Techno, why did you hit me?"

It wasn't you, Techno wanted to shout. *And it wasn't me*.

But his trident was still a breath away from cutting into Wilbur's skin.

"I'm sorry," Techno rasped, feeling as if he'd just ran the entire circumference of this gods-damned world. "Is it you? Is it you now?"

Wilbur blinked drowsily as if coming out from a long sleep. "Of course it's me, Techno. Who else could it be?"

Techno felt the fight drain from him in an instant. He drew his trident back and offered his free hand to Wilbur, the silver scars running through his palms like the invisible the webs that kept him forever bound to this brotherhood. "Come on," Techno said softly. "We have a god to kill."

Wilbur's eyes hardened with resolve even as he smiled at Techno. "For Tommy."

"For Tommy," Techno repeated as Wilbur took his hand, everything that came before already forgotten. It was an interlude, nothing more, and they were on the same side again. This was right. *This* was their fate, no matter what else was dictated.

Wilbur was on his feet, swaying slightly. He eyed Techno oddly, snowflakes caught in the tangles of his dark hair. He could have been one of his mother's paintings, standing like that in the middle of this frozen city, immortalized in a way Techno could never be. And then, with furrowed brows, he pulled Techno into a warm embrace. Techno stiffened in surprise, but soon sunk into the comforting circle of Wilbur's arms, his wounded shoulders screaming with the effort of returning his gentle hold.

"Techno," Wilbur whispered into Techno's sunset hair, breathing in the lingering scent of flowers long rotted.

"Wil?" Techno whispered back.

"Once penned," Wilbur said shakily, "an ending cannot be restored," and he plunged a dagger straight into Techno's back.

Not a dagger.

The dagger.

The dagger that had stopped a young prince's heart. The dagger that had once lived in a blood god's bandolier. The dagger that had been part of a collection gifted by an angel of death. It had passed between them all, their fingers all leaving invisible marks in its carved handle. And now it was in Wilbur's hand. He heard a soft, distant exhale of surprise as it carved through the man he once called brother—the dagger's final scabbard.

The cycle was complete.

The curtains were drawing closed.

All Wilbur could do was scream at an empty stage.

Techno's life had not been the easiest thing in the world. He had been in more battles than he could count, and more wars than anyone deserved. His body bore the evidence of a tiresome existence; he could still feel Wilbur's worried eyes tracing the cross-stitch pattern of scars on his back, though even more ran under the cover of his clothes. He'd been burned, beaten and shot, and had felt every type of blade under the sun pierce his godly skin. And all those hurts combined still could not compare to the pain that went through him as he felt Wilbur's embrace slacken, and Techno fell to the ground, ruby blood staining the soft white snow beneath him. *His* blood. Blood that *Wilbur* had drawn.

His breath quickened as the agony tore through him. Gods were not built to suffer this anguish. But, even as he laid there, feeling both cold and on fire at once, he could hear the Green God's voice in his head—not the chorus of the voices, but a memory that felt more ancient than their eternal cycle.

Mortal hearts can only take so much hurt.

Techno groaned, shutting his eyes to a sudden piercing pain.

Immortal hearts aren't much different, especially if they've been foolishly given to the wrong people.

Was this it, then? Was this heartbreak?

A shadow eclipsed all sunlight. Techno forced himself to open his eyes, and found Wilbur standing over him with a knife in his hands—still dripping with Techno's blood and still rusted with Tommy's.

Wilbur had kept it. The symbol of Techno's greatest mistake, the thing that had killed one brother and had nearly shattered the other, *Wilbur had kept it.*

And all at once, Techno knew. Wilbur had not forgiven him. And if Wilbur could not forgive him, who could? Who would? He could search the entire universe and the answer would still be the same. *No one*. A sob of pain, violent and sudden and unfamiliar, escaped Techno's trembling mouth. *No one at all*.

Wilbur tilted his head to the side as he considered Techno lying in the snow. He went to Techno's side and kneeled there, as if he might provide comfort, though the light had once again fled from behind his eyes. But whether it was him or the Green God calling the tune now, it didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore beyond the pain.

Techno felt his shoulders shake, and a beat later realized he must be laughing—a bitter, angry sound. The last wail of a bird struck from the sky.

He still somehow had his trident in his hand, but he let it go now. He let everything go once he saw Wilbur raise his arm high, a guillotine about to drop on the wickedest criminal the world had ever seen.

"It's alright," Techno whispered to the brother he knew was still somehow listening, somewhere. "I won't hurt you again. It's over." His heart stuttered out its final pulses. "I'm never going to hurt anyone again."

Techno thought Wilbur's hands must have trembled a bit, but it could have been his own vision failing, or a trick of the dying light.

"It's alright," Techno repeated softly, believing it with everything he had left in him. "It is not your fault."

The voices—*Dream'*s voice—were strangely silent, and Techno felt its absence with bitter relief. Here, at last, was the eternal quiet.

"Look me in the eyes. Let him look me in the eyes," Techno demanded. "At least give me that."

The soft brown shade of Wilbur's eyes, so bright in the fading sunlight, was the last thing the god of blood saw before the dagger dropped.

Philza's blade dug into and through the Green God's shoulder. Emerald eyes widened with surprise as Philza kept going until the sword pierced through the rubble and then the earth beneath, pinning the god into the ground. It was not the unbreakable fetters the bastard deserved, but it would have to do as a restraint. Red blood—*Even he bleeds red,* Philza thought—bloomed through the dirty-white cloth of Dream's tunic and ran down in rivulets into the stones below.

Philza loosened his grip on the hilt of his sword, and then let go completely.

"That should keep you still for a while," said Philza, stepping back from his makeshift prisoner.

The Green God eyed the blade with annoyance, trying to rise and then flinching with pain, before turning his glare on the man that had bound him, however temporarily, to the earth.

"I could still ruin him from here," Dream mused darkly. "It would only take one flick of my wrist."

“Wilbur isn’t that weak,” Philza replied coldly before turning his back on his enemy. “He isn’t weak at all.”

His wings spread wide. He could see, in the distance, two figures in the snow. One lying, one kneeling. Philza would not be too late again.

“Choosing to run away then, are we?” the Green God shouted after him.

“I’m choosing my son,” Philza answered, and was gone.

It took exactly four seconds for the Angel of Death to close the gap.

One. The blood god murmured his last assurances to a king with vengeance poised over his heart.

Two. As infinitesimal as the breath of the smallest creature ever born from stardust, the dagger began to shake in the ruined king’s hand. A frown began to tug at the corner of the Green God’s lips, an unfamiliar shape. For once, he realized, he might actually have to put in some effort.

Three. Despite it all, despite everything, despite the Angel of Death’s distant shout, despite the cracks in the wall, the dagger still plunged.

Four. But Philza was there.

His hand closed around his son’s wrist, ending his weapon’s violent arc a hair’s breadth away Techno’s still chest. The father and his heir kneeled on opposite sides of the blood god, the dagger trembling between them as they fought for dominance: Wilbur to push and wound, Philza to seize and protect.

Wilbur raised his severe glare at the disruption. “You were not meant to be here,” he growled, the words not his own.

“But I am,” Philza said quietly, tightening his hold on Wilbur. “Drop the dagger, Wil.”

Wilbur’s eyebrows furrowed as he pushed harder against Philza. “You should hate him,” Wilbur drawled. “He brought Tommy to that battlefield. The man that killed Tommy meant to kill him. *You should hate him,”* he repeated more strongly, a hint of emotion final creeping into his voice. Was it anger? Was it grief? Was there a difference?

Between them, Techno took a rattling breath, but did not speak.

“Do you?” Philza asked gently. “Do you hate him, Wilbur?”

“Yes,” Wilbur said. And then, quieter, “No.” He closed his eyes suddenly, as if in pain. “What I mean—no. He killed my brother. But I killed my brother, too. We all killed him, the three of us. All of us are at fault.” When he opened his eyes again, they shone with tears. “But if I kill you, too, then who will be left to forgive me?”

“Yourself,” Philza replied, slowly inching the dagger up and away from Techno. And Wilbur let him. “You can forgive yourself, Wilbur, because I already forgive you. No matter what you do to me.”

“You don’t mean that,” Wilbur said gravely. “You can’t mean that.”

In response, Philza tenderly raised Wilbur’s hand towards his chest, until the dagger’s point rested over where his heart hid beating. “Let me prove it, then.”

For a moment, Wilbur only looked at him, his hand trembling in Philza’s hold. And then he said, “He’s in my head.” His grip tightened around the hilt as warm tears spilled over his pale cheeks. “He’s *everywhere*.” He began pushing the blade forwards. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

Philza smiled sadly as the dagger’s sharp point found skin and drew blood. “This isn’t your fault. It will never be your fault.” Blood bloomed and spilled over, like the roots of a plant breaking past its inadequate vase, but the pain of it was secondary. With his son pushing a dagger into his heart, Philza said, “I will love you forever.”

Wilbur’s expression crumpled. “*Father*,” he gasped, and dropped the dagger.

Before it could fall into the snow, Techno was rising to his knees, his arms going around Wilbur. He pulled the mortal king into a tight embrace, and Philza for the first time saw the wound in his back. Techno had gotten worse injuries, Philza knew, but this was different. It must hurt like hell to even breathe with it, but Techno held on to Wilbur regardless, as if letting go was a fate worse than death. Wilbur, in turn, buried his face into Techno’s bloody shoulder, his own arms slack at his sides as he fell apart. He gave a strangled gasp, and then was crying in earnest, trembling with the force of his misery.

Philza’s heart cracked just a little bit more at the sound.

“I’m sorry for hurting you,” Wilbur whispered, his words muffled against Techno’s hair and interrupted every syllable by sobs that came from deep within him. “I’m sorry for everything.”

“Hey.” Techno’s voice was uncharacteristically soft. “Consider it payback for me breaking your nose.”

“I don’t want payback.” Wilbur sighed as he leaned into Techno’s embrace. He looked so small and breakable. A glass figurine of a boy. “I just want to go home. I want to bury my little brother.”

Philza couldn’t see Techno’s face but knew it must look as shattered as Philza felt.

“I want that, too,” Techno said. “We’ll do it together, alright?”

“Okay,” Wilbur breathed. “You and me.”

“Me and you,” Techno repeated.

“Aw,” a distant voice cooed. “That’s sweet. But are you done now?”

Techno and Wilbur broke apart, bloodstained and still ready to fight on as they turned towards the disrupting sound. Philza felt his pulse jump as he followed their cold glares towards the far building, where a green-eyed god stood on top of rubble, bleeding for his shoulder but otherwise unscathed. He held Philza’s sword in one hand and gave it a casual spin, splattering blood across the snow before him before stepping forwards, his gait unhurried.

There was a shuffle as Techno and Philza placed themselves in front of Wilbur.

The Green God rolled his eyes as he continued stalking forwards. “Come on, there’s no need for that. You’ve already flung me from his head. That little thread is severed completely.” He rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Would have been fun if you’d killed each other, though. What a tragic ending you would have written.” He considered them with a thoughtful tilt of his head. “I could still use Techno, though—”

“No, you can’t,” Techno snapped. “I’m done with you and your little voices. Have been for years.”

“You fancy yourself immune to me, then?” Dream smirked. “There are more ways than one to control someone, you know.”

The realization was slow, but steady, coming gradually to Philza like the tides crawling towards the shore. And then, all at once, it struck him.

“Control me, then,” he said suddenly, rising to his feet and meeting the Green God’s stare. “Go on.”

Dream narrowed his eyes at him, with something blazing to life behind that carefully lax expression. Layers and layers, and Philza was going to tear them all down. The truth was there. It was so close, he could feel the weight of it in his hands. *There were stories before, of the Green God being afraid of you,* Techno had said. Phil had known of those stories. And he’d spent decades since asking why. Why him? What did he have?

He was going to find out very soon.

“Phil, what are you doing?” Techno hissed from behind him.

“Just asking a question,” Philza replied. “You’ve threatened to pull Techno’s strings. You’ve used Wilbur against us. You’ve been the voice in their heads for years, mocking us all from afar. But you’ve never been in mine. Why is that, Dream?” He said the name deliberately, lacing each letter with poisonous intention. *“Why is that?”*

The arrogance slipped off the Green God’s face, replaced with a tempered viciousness. Philza had the distinct impression that he was facing a wild beast kept on a frayed leash. He was treading on dangerous territory. Every instinct screamed to be careful and to draw back.

Instead, Philza approached without caution.

“You *are* afraid of me,” he said. “You are afraid of what I am and what I have. And that pisses you off, doesn’t it? It angers you to know what I am, you can never be. What you take, I give. What you ruin, I restore.” With a deft maneuvering of his boot, Philza flicked the bloody dagger by his feet up towards him. Philza snatched it out of the air without missing a beat. “I am your antithesis.”

The Green God began to laugh, but it was a delicate sound. “You are *nothing*,” he said scornfully. He stopped walking and pointed Philza’s own sword right at him. “Allow me to prove it.”

“Techno.” Philza settled into a fighting stance. “Take Wilbur and run.”

“You know, Philza,” Techno said, stumbling to Philza’s side with his trident back in his hands, “after all these years, I thought you’d finally get it through your thick skull that I don’t take any orders from you.”

Before Philza could protest, Wilbur had walked up to his other side, an arrow already nocked into his bow, a fierce clarity in his dark eyes. He gave his father a grim nod.

“We started this together,” said Wilbur, “we end together, too.”

“But your injuries—”

“Eh.” Techno shrugged his bleeding shoulders. “Flesh wounds, at best.”

“I almost killed you,” Wilbur said dryly.

“That doesn’t sound right. Must have been a different, much weaker blood god.” It would have been a more believable deflection if pain had not flickered across his face as he said it. “Now, look sharp, Your Majesties. The enemy approaches.”

“Enemy is such a strong word,” the Green God mused. “We are old friends, after all. Old, *old* friends.”

“Oh,” said Wilbur, “shut the fuck up,” and let his arrow fly.

It missed. Obviously. The Green God was a wickedly fast bastard, and Wilbur had barely been aiming—he had fired for the sake of firing, just to have his hands do damage to something that he hated instead of something that he loved. Dream danced easily out of harm’s way, only to find the Angel of Death flying towards him, slashing out with a bloody dagger. Dream parried with Father’s own sword and jumped back, and was met by Techno striking out with his trident. The Green God ducked and dodged under the Techno’s barrage, each movement fluid like a candle dancing in the gentle air.

In the lull between Techno’s attacks, Dream spun on his heel with his sword cleaving the space between the three of them. Father leapt backwards, but Techno dropped to the ground instead, sweeping his leg out in an attempt to trip their opponent. The Green God jumped

over him, just as Wilbur let another arrow fly, this time with every intention of embedding it straight through the pale column of Dream's neck.

But Dream simply grabbed the arrow out of the air, snapping it in half with this thumb and tossing it over his shoulder before he even landed back down on the snow. Techno scrambled to his feet to meet Dream's renewed offensive, but Wilbur could tell even from afar that his movements were sloppy and sluggish. Despite his posturing, the wounds Wilbur had inflicted on him had cut deep, and not a second went by without Wilbur remembering the way the blade had slipped so easily into Techno's back. Whatever he'd said of a god's invincibility, they still bled the same way mortals do.

Even now, Wilbur could feel the voices—the Green God's little spiders—lurking in the edges of his consciousness, just waiting for him to let his guard down again.

They only seemed to strike when Wilbur least expected it: when he was falling asleep or when he was caught in the tides of his own emotions. It explained how he'd been to places he didn't remember walking to, or witnessed things he shouldn't have, or done things he never would do when he was fully himself. He could still see Tommy's face in his mind's eye, trembling in his cot as Wilbur stood over him with a shard of glass.

Wilby, please, don't hurt me, he'd said then, the same way Techno had whispered, *It's alright. It is not your fault.* Too many times had Wilbur been used against the people he loved the most. Tommy. Techno. His kingdom. His father. All to serve the Green God's ends. Puppets on a string, all of them were. But if Dream wanted him to dance, then Wilbur was going to give him one hell of a closing act.

He was running low on arrows, and the gods were moving too fast for his mortal eyes to catch, so he threw both bow and quiver away. He rushed towards where his rapier sat in the snow, its intricate pommel glinting in invitation. The weapon slipped easily into his hand. It was an extension of his fury, and they joined the fray together.

Techno had almost forgotten how well he and Philza fought together. They slipped into old, familiar rhythms—like the ebb and flow of the ancient ocean. The years fell away, and Techno was back in one of the myriad battlefields they'd decimated when they were younger and more foolish. Philza struck when Techno withdrew, and Techno stepped between Philza and the enemy when he struck back, taking the brunt of the attack with the silver shaft of his trident. It rattled him down to his bones, but the jolt was a welcome rush, making Techno grin despite the screaming pain of his fresh wounds.

Why was it that Techno felt most alive when he was fighting off death?

The Green God must have seen the gleam in his eyes, because he stepped away from Techno with a knowing smirk.

Enjoying yourself, blood god? the voices taunted.

Techno thought of Tommy and Wilbur and his lost, nameless siblings.

“I will,” Techno replied, throwing his trident in a fierce arc across the frozen grounds.

To avoid it, the Green God stepped to the side—straight into Philza’s path. Philza had his dagger brandished, ready to make the killing blow, ready to claim another life. And then Dream leapt upwards. The dagger passed harmlessly under his feet, which kept soaring higher and higher.

“Aw, gods damn it all,” Technoblade groaned. “The bastard can *fly?”*

He hovered in the sky suspended by no strings Techno could see. No raven wings like Philza, either. He simply floated in the air, almost casually, as if it was a simple stroll through the woods. He caught Techno’s eye, and smiled. Techno cursed himself for his naivety; the man could restructure the very fabric of the universe, *of course* he could fly.

Philza’s shoulders tensed as he gazed up at the Green God in his lackadaisical flight.

“The sky is my domain, Dream,” Philza drawled. A shiver went down Techno’s spine; the Angel of Death’s words were as cold as the tundra around them. “You dare trespass?”

The Green God crossed his arms behind his head and adopted a thoughtful expression. “Nothing in this realm is yours to keep, Philza. Not the sky, not the earth you stand on, and not your family.” He scoffed derisively. “I thought I already made that abundantly clear.”

Philza’s wings spread, about to take flight.

“Techno!”

Techno turned towards the voice. He would always turn towards that voice.

Wilbur was running up towards him, a sword gripped tightly his hand. He made a single motion with the other, and Techno understood at once. He crouched and cupped his hands over his knee. He gritted his teeth and braced for impact as Wilbur neared, his brows drawn together in focus.

And then Wilbur was stepping into the cradle of Techno’s hands, a heavy, yet steady weight. In the space of a heartbeat, Techno straightened, pouring all of his remaining strength into his arms, and he *threw*.

Before Philza could even lift a foot off the ground, Wilbur was soaring over him, as fast and as lethal as one of his own arrows. He raised his rapier high over his head, its sharp point cleaving through the air. Techno saw the Green God’s eyes widen in surprise, right before Wilbur collided with him and sent both of them crashing to the ground in a blur of blades and a tangle of flailing limbs.

Techno rushed towards where they fell, wrenching his trident out of the ground as he passed it.

By the time he skidded to a halt before the Green God, Wilbur already had him pinned to the ground with the tip of his rapier at Dream’s throat. Wilbur pried the hilt of Philza’s sword out

of the god's grip and offered it back to its owner without taking his dark eyes off of the enemy. Just like Techno taught him.

"You dropped this," Wilbur said, chest heaving but voice steady. A long scratch running down the length of his cheek was the only evidence of his fall.

Philza took his sword back with a confused glance at Techno. "When did Wil become an acrobat?" he asked incredulously.

Wilbur wiped the blood from his cheek with the back of his free hand and replied, "My father's avian god genetics passed over me, so I had to compensate. When you can't fly, you learn how to jump as high as you can."

"Poetic," Techno drawled, "but a lie. I taught him that maneuver to run from diplomats."

"I never used it until now, though," Wilbur grumbled defensively. And then, quieter, "Snitch."

Techno gave him a quiet smile only a handful of people had ever witnessed. *Like a miracle,* Tommy had once said of it. *Like a godsdamned fucking miracle, that smile!*

"How many times," the Green God asked wryly, cutting the fragile levity into shreds, "must you pin me down before you realize it's all futile?"

Wilbur glared. "As many times as it takes."

"Go on, then." Dream sighed, tilting his head back to bare his throat to them all. "Kill me. Or have a crisis of morals about killing me—your choice, really. We've been here before. You've come this close before, though not one step further."

"Why?" Philza asked. "What stopped us?"

The god's emerald eyes glinted like chunks of broken ice. Something stirred in Techno's gut—a sudden reaction to an ancient, nameless fear. Techno's hand settled on Wilbur's shoulder. Something was wrong. Or something was *going* to be wrong, very soon, and he needed to get Wilbur out of here, like Philza had intended. He could see Philza in his periphery, holding tightly to his sword. He could tell he felt it, too.

The war was over.

The winner was decided. Had been decided, long ago.

"Like I said." The Green God smiled at Phil, and only at Phil. "It would only take one flick of my wrist."

He raised a hand—a single, pale hand dusted with melting snow and half-dried blood. And, in the end, that really was all it took.

They froze as it finally settled over them. A change in the air. A new page turning. A hushed shuffle as a new audience settled into their seats for another show.

Another loop. Another story. Another life.

Wilbur turned to Techno with wide, wide eyes. The rapier fell from his grip as he opened his mouth in a silent shout.

Philza, Techno thought. *Philza, help—*

But Philza was made of stone.

And the world ended in silence.

And they lived happily ever after.

“That’s it?”

Wilbur glanced up from his instrument with furrowed brows. “What do you mean?” he asked as he lowered the violin from his chin and gazed at the woman sitting across from him, her heavy skirts spilling around her in a cerulean tide.

She did not meet his confused stare. Her attention was fixed entirely on the easel in front of her, turned slightly away from him so all he could see were random splotches of color. Paint stained her hands and hair and skin: deep indigos and soft blues and the dark browns of the eyes that were his inheritance from her.

Mother considered her canvas in silence for a few seconds before making a gentle stroke with her brush. “You stopped playing all of a sudden,” she murmured absently. “I thought the song was finished.”

“It’s not,” Wilbur said. “Just like your painting isn’t, either.”

She shot him a rueful smile. “When did you get so cheeky?”

“When you weren’t looking, I suppose.” He pointed his violin’s bow accusingly at her. “And I only stopped because you interrupted me.”

“I did *not* interrupt you! I would never.” She tucked a stray hair behind her ear—leaving a golden streak of paint across her cheek in the process—before turning back to her painting. “You remember the rules for the Art Tower, don’t you, my boy?”

Wilbur rolled his eyes affectionately at her. The ‘Art Tower’ had been his mother’s idea, and her first mistake had been allowing a ten-year-old Wilbur to name it. It was the east tower of the castle, and it was meant to be a place just for the two of them. A place where Wilbur could play as loud and as badly as he wanted, and where Mother could accidentally spill jars of paint without ruining some random priceless artifact. A place where stringed instruments hung on the walls instead of morning stars and swords, and worn easels stood in place of suits of armor. It was a tower. And it was full of art. Thus, following young Wilbur’s stream of consciousness—the Art Tower.

Older Wilbur would have chosen something a bit more tasteful. He would name it after the massive arched windows that let in the soft morning light, or the daffodils that grew at the sills, or the white lace curtains dancing in the breeze like the veil of a bride made of air. But, it would be Art Tower, now and forever.

Tommy would never let him live it down.

“I’m not hearing any music,” Mother hummed.

Wilbur sighed lovingly as he put the violin back under his chin. “The things I do for you, Mother.”

Her eyes crinkled at the corners as she gave him a dazzling smile. “If you finish your song,” she said, “I’ll let you peek at the canvas.”

“That’s bribery. You are bribing your son. Your own sweet boy!”

She tossed her head back in a laugh, brown and gray ringlets falling over her shoulders. “Dance for me, my puppet!” she chortled. She waggled the fingers that weren’t holding the paintbrush in some vague approximation of puppetry. “Dance!”

Wilbur shook his head and raised his eyes to the heavens. “Alright,” he said. “From the top, then.”

He put bow to string and began to play again.

A shadow fell over Techno as a giggle interrupted the sounds of the forest, chasing the birds back to their nests. Without opening his eyes, Techno said, “I know it’s you.”

Another giggle, quieter this time, as if she were trying to swallow back her childish glee.

“Papa wants you home,” she said cheerfully. “You’re in big trouble.”

“Sure,” Techno drawled sarcastically, “and you aren’t a little brat.”

“*Hey*. That’s rude! Papa said you weren’t allowed to be rude to me anymore!”

Techno felt something against his ribs that might have been a kick or a gentle breeze. He smiled to himself as he finally cracked one eye open to look at his little sister. She was pouting, arms crossed and brows furrowed as if she could ever be terrifying to him. She intimidated him as much as the bumblebee drifting drowsily overhead, so close Techno could reach out and trap it between his cupped hands. But instead he stayed where he was, arms folded under his head, the grass beneath him as soft as a bed of hay.

“Papa really does want you home, though,” she reiterated, even as she dropped onto the ground beside him and laid her little head against his chest, her twin braids like pink snakes coiling across his torso. Techno leveled his breathing so she could stay lying there peacefully, as if she were a wild animal that could be spooked away with one wrong move. But though she did have some of the wilderness in her, there was no doubt in his mind that she was

fearless. Six years old, and Techno already knew that she would someday rule the world—and he would be the proudest older brother on the face of the earth.

"Techno?" she asked pensively after a moment of comfortable silence (there was seldom a different kind of silence between the two of them; in a family of loud, loving parents and louder, more annoying siblings, he and his youngest sister had managed to carve out a space for themselves where they did not need to shout to be heard). She was gazing up at the foliage above them, her face dotted with the sunlight that punctured stubbornly through the leaves, unwilling to let their route to the earth be interrupted by anything less than a fellow star child. "Do you ever feel like," she began haltingly, "like your spirit is too big for your own body?"

"Nah," Techno replied after a serious consideration. "My spirit likes where it is just fine."

She rolled over to fix him with her piercing blue eyes, looking annoyed. As if Techno had failed some sort of test he did not even know he was taking. "Well, *I* feel like that sometimes," she declared imperiously.

"How could you not? You're so small, of course your spirit would want to break out of there. You're suffocating it."

"I feel like a frog sometimes, too," she continued, in that nonsensical way that young children often bounced from the heaviest subjects to the lightest without warning or prolonged thought. Techno missed having that kind of power—the power to simply not give a damn. "Mama and I went to the village yesterday, and it rained, so we had to stop under a tree so we wouldn't get wet, and I found three frogs running by in the rain! *Three* frogs, Techno! Have you ever seen three frogs all at once?"

"Never," Techno lied easily. "That's the rarest occurrence in the world, I think. As rare as a quadruple rainbow. I think the gods might be sending you a sign."

"And the frogs," she barreled on, seeming to give no heed to Techno's reply, "they were just jumping from one puddle to another. Splish, splash, splish, splash. But I don't think they liked any of the puddles because they didn't stay in one for too long. Splish, splash, on to the next adventure!"

"Adventure, huh?" Techno mused. "Is that what your spirit wants then? To break out for a great big adventure?"

"I don't know what my spirit wants to do when it gets out."

When, Techno noted. Not *if*. What she wanted, she would get, and Techno was almost always the instrument for it.

"But," she added, getting to her feet, "right now, I think I'd rather not get scolded by papa. So, let's go home."

And she smiled, that smile that ran in Techno's family and seemed to find him the only exception. It was a smile, Techno thought, that wars would be fought for. It was a smile that

could burn this whole damn forest down. The gods took all the good things they had ever created and stitched it into the corners of that smile.

Techno couldn't help but smile back, rougher on the edges and made of meaner stuff.

He got to his feet and held out a hand to his sister. She placed her tiny palm in his. It was the most precious thing Techno would ever hold.

"Let's go home," he echoed.

Philza rolled the apple between his palms, feeling its weight in his hands for a moment before he tossed it into the basket by his feet. Already, it was piled high with the ruby-red fruit, spilling over into the grass below. He stepped back and inhaled deeply, the scent of apple blossoms and spring and *life* crawling into his lungs and settling there like an animal in hibernation. He could taste the sweetness on his tongue. He could feel the breeze against his skin.

The apple orchard was ready for harvest, and everything was all right with the world.

"Dad!"

Philza turned to watch his son weaving between the trees. He couldn't help the laugh that exploded out of him at the sight of his youngest son's arms piled high with apples, toppling to the ground with every excited step he took. By the time he reached Phil, he only had a handful left with him, the rest leaving a trail of red through the orchard.

But he was grinning as if he had accomplished something great.

"Best delivery boy in the whole kingdom," Tommy said proudly. "I'm still waiting for that promotion to Head Apple-Picker."

Philza ruffled his hair affectionately. *He's gotten so tall,* Phil thought as the golden strands slipped between his fingers like running water. "You have to beat out other competition to get that title, Tommy. Can't have the people thinking I'm giving you special treatment."

"It's only right to give special treatment to your special boy!" Tommy declared, rolling the apples into the grass by his feet.

"That is nepotism."

"No, it's *being a good father."*

Phil's smile faltered, almost infinitesimally. But Tommy caught it anyway.

"Hey," he said with a gentler voice than Philza deserved. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Phil said, feeling fissures form in his chest where his heart used to beat. He took a deep breath, letting the taste of pollen linger on his tongue before he swallowed the bitterness down. "Nothing's wrong. And that's the problem, isn't it?"

Tommy stared back at him with soft blue eyes. Someone once told Philza that children were merely reflections of their parents, but he knew that couldn't be true. Because every time he looked in a mirror, he only ever saw the worst of himself—all the places he'd abandoned, all the people he'd killed, all the sons he'd left orphaned. But when he looked at Tommy, all he ever saw was proof that the universe still had the capacity for goodness.

Tommy really did get a lot taller. In time, he would grow to be even taller than Philza was.

If only he hadn't died before he could.

There were many things, Philza knew, that Tommy could never do now. To even have him standing before Philza under the shifting shadows of their kingdom's apple trees was an impossibility. Tommy's brows drew together in confusion as the silence between them stretched on; Philza knew he was only prolonging the inevitable.

Just let me stay in this lie, he begged, *for one second more.*

A minute passed. Two. Tommy shifted on his feet.

"Dad…?" he whispered.

Philza sighed, and, in a quiet, broken voice, he said, "This isn't real, is it?"

Tommy stared at him blankly.

And then he began to smile.

"Follow the breadcrumbs," his little sister said. "That's what papa always says."

The path was well-worn and cut through the thickest part of the forest. The trees were so close together that the sunlight could no longer pierce through, leaving the two of them walking through the dim with no guide but their hands in each other's and the memory of their father's murmured words. *Follow the breadcrumbs*. The little things would be the ones that kept them on the right track: a crooked tree, a low-hanging branch with all its leaves plucked off by passing hands, a pile of rocks by the side of the road that a younger Techno had spent three bored minutes stacking together—now moss-covered and leaning dangerously to the side, but still standing.

Following breadcrumbs through a cold, dark forest with his little sister's hand curled around his fingers. This was a route they knew by heart, and a story they've lived hundreds of times before.

"Follow the breadcrumbs," his sister repeated, tightening her grip on Techno, "and you'll never get lost."

And then, slowly, she began pulling him to the side, heading straight towards the brambles.

Techno pulled her back onto the road, small feet skidding reluctantly across the dirt. "Papa also says to not stray from the path," he reminded her sternly, eyeing the dark trees standing

like silent sentinels on either side of them. The path was safe. The path would take them home. Anything else was a dangerous gamble. Though he knew this forest well, it did not know him at all, and gods knew what monsters lurked behind the bushes, waiting for wandering strangers. “Keep away from the dark—”

“Or the Spider will get you,” she finished, and her voice was dead and dull.

Techno’s heart skipped a beat. He was used to her jumping from one emotion to another, but this was something different. Something that was not her at all.

“Are you alright?” he asked worriedly.

“Yes,” she whispered back, as if there was an invisible threat she was careful not to startle. “Just tired.”

“Do you want me to carry you on my back?”

“No.” She took a deep breath. “We always have to walking side by side. This is how it happened.”

Confusion and panic warring inside him, Techno said, “How *what* happened?”

She suddenly paused, pulling Techno to a stop with her. She had her eyes fixed straight, looking off towards a horizon Techno couldn’t see. There was only the dark, and the weight of her small hand slowly growing colder in his.

“Techno,” she said slowly, quietly, too unlike the brilliant girl that spoke of souls and adventures and frogs in the rain just a few hours—days—years—eons ago. “Techno,” she repeated firmly, turning towards him with wide, fearful eyes. “Techno, what’s my name?”

Techno opened his mouth to answer, but silence was his only reply.

“You’ve stopped again.”

Wilbur slowly lowered his bow, looking around the tower with a growing sense of unease. He did not remember learning the song he’d been playing for his mother. Did he write it himself? Was it a ballad from some long-dead composer? Still thinking about the unfamiliar tune, Wilbur walked silently towards the table in the corner, where the silk-lined case for his violin stood open and waiting. He placed the instrument gently inside and snapped the case shut. For a moment, his fingers lingered on the gold clasps.

I don’t even play the violin.

He turned towards his mother, who continued painting as if nothing had happened, lost in her colors.

“Mother?” Wilbur called. “Mama?”

She paused, then gestured him over. “Come look at this, Wil.”

Wilbur made his way over to her, stopping just behind her and placing his hands on her shoulders as he leaned in to look at her work.

There was a painting hanging in the hallway downstairs that Wilbur walked under at least a dozen times a day: it was the official family portrait, done by their court painter, when Tommy was just a toddler and slept soundly through everything. Wilbur had always hated it. They'd all looked so stiff and serious in it, and Wilbur could still remember the horrid pins and needles he acquired from sitting on the floor for hours on end.

And his mother, in response, had made it beautiful.

She'd used brighter colors, softer colors, turning the dark, somber shades into something that felt more alive. Everything was the same, and yet everything was different. Still seated on a simple throne was Mother herself, but with more gray in her pinned-up hair. Behind her, a hand on her shoulder, was Father. He stood with his blue eyes lit up with pride, the only signs of his age in the laugh lines forming at his temples as he smiled back at Wilbur from the canvas. And then, drawing all attention inevitably to him, there was Tommy, leaning against the arm of Mother's chair.

He was older, too, with longer hair, curling over his ears and shoulders. But the traces of his childhood remained in the wolfish grin and the cocky quirk of his eyebrow. Before Wilbur could think better of himself, he reached out to run his fingers along the painted lines of his brother's face. Fortunately, the paint had already dried, and Wilbur was free to trace the gentle curls of Tommy's hair.

Then, slowly, Wilbur's hand drifted towards the floor, where he had been sitting in the original painting. He wondered how Mother made him beautiful, if that was at all possible in the first place. He wondered how the years had made their mark on him.

But instead of paint, there were only pencil marks where Wilbur was supposed to be. Vaguely in the shape of a person. A sketch.

He looked down at his Mother, and she turned in her seat to look at him with a sad smile. "You're not done yet," she whispered, raising her hand to cup his cheek and gently wipe away the single tear that had escaped without his notice.

"I ruined it," he sobbed. "I'm sorry—"

"No, darling, that's not what I meant at all." She got up from her seat and wrapped her arms around Wilbur. Wilbur had to duck his head to bury his face into her shoulder, trembling with a grief he could not name. His mother held him like he was a child again, seeking comfort from nightmares. "You have ruined nothing. You are the greatest gift of my life, Wilbur. But I do not want you here."

He pulled back with tear-stained cheeks, unable to fit enough air into his heavy lungs. "Here?" he asked. "Where is *here*?"

"The Art Tower," she replied simply. "And everywhere. And nowhere."

And Wilbur remembered.

“I’ve been here before,” Philza said. “We’ve been here—all of us. Everyone caught in his web.”

Tommy made a noncommittal sound as he waved a hand through the air. “More or less.” He wiggled his fingers absently as he thought. “It’s like… well, we’re all in his play, aren’t we? That’s what he said. If that’s right, then this place is the wings, where everyone waits before the curtains rise, or after their part is done.” He looked up at Philza. “Or when they’re waiting for their turn.”

“We’re all dreaming,” Philza murmured, repeating the Green God’s own words. “He’s put us to sleep while he’s writing the next story and giving us good things to keep us pacified. Like *children*.”

He looked down at Tommy, watching his son’s expression as it shifted. Philza was sitting against the trunk of an apple tree, with Tommy’s head resting across his lap and apple blossoms falling idly through the hazy air. Under any other circumstances, it would have been a perfect day. As it was, all Phil could see was phantom blood on his hands from the last time he’d held Tommy this close, and a growing sense of trepidation as each second ticked by. Another second where the Green God was tearing the real world apart. Another second towards another story of rebirth and tragedy and unknowing. Another second without knowing where Techno and Wilbur were, whether they were safe, whether they were alive, whether they could still remember who they were and who he was and what they still had to do.

“You aren’t really you, either,” Philza said, less of a question and more of a lament that he was right. Hesitantly, he ran his fingers over Tommy’s hair, and felt his heart snap when Tommy did not pull away. “You’re someone I want you to be.”

“I’m someone you *need* me to be,” Tommy corrected. “Does that make any of this less real? Does that mean I’m not really here, trying to make you wake up and go save my dumb brothers? Does that mean I’m really gone—not even a ghost or a memory?” He shrugged. “Who knows? You’re supposed to be the adult here. You tell me.”

“Adults don’t have all the answers, Tommy,” Phil said. “No matter how much I wish we did.”

“Answer me this, then,” said Tommy, reaching out to run a hand over the obsidian feathers of the wing Philza had been using to block the sunlight from his eyes, “how the hell did you hide these? Hard to imagine I just didn’t notice you walking around with two massive fucking wings jutting out of your back.”

“I’m a god, Tommy,” Phil said slowly. “I can hide anything.”

Tommy’s blue eyes slid to Phil’s. “Not everything.”

Without waiting for a reply, Tommy sat up and put both of his hands on Phil’s shoulders, his expression deadly serious. *I never knew this side of him,* Phil thought. *And I never will*.

“Listen,” Tommy said, as if Philza was not already hanging on to his every word, memorizing every syllable and intonation. “I know you’ve already figured it out. You know why Dream is so afraid of you. And it’s the same reason why you’re the only person that can break out of here.”

“*If* I can,” Philza said, “why have I never done so before? We’ve been in this cycle for eons.”

“You’ve come close,” Tommy replied. “*So* close, a few times. But either Dream always finished rewriting before you could, or…” Tommy paused for just one second before continuing, more resolutely, “Or you didn’t want to leave.”

Philza opened his mouth to say he would never do that. He would never jeopardize an entire universe just to revel in some lie, no matter how beautiful it was.

But then he realized he already had.

Swallowing the bitter taste on his tongue, Phil asked, “I want to stay, Tommy.”

Tommy blinked, his expression crumbling with anger and disappointment. And then, clarity, as the first of Philza’s tears began to drop, a warm and silent rainfall. He never could hide anything from Tommy. “But you won’t,” Tommy finished, something like pride flickering in his eyes.

“But I won’t,” Philza confirmed, wrapping his hands around Tommy’s wrists and holding on for dear life. “I have to end it, Tommy. I can’t put everyone through this again. I can’t put Wilbur and Techno through this again.”

Tommy grinned, triumphant. “That’s my Dad.”

“My Tommy.” And with that, Phil gently pulled Tommy’s hands away from his shoulders and stood, brushing apple blossoms from his clothes. They fell to the grass, limp and already rotting despite their loveliness.

Tommy got up, and for a moment, they stood there together, just son and father, looking out over their orchard and remembering slow days when once they were four, with Tommy on Wilbur’s shoulders and their mother painting and Philza tossing flowers into the air just to hear his family laughing.

“They call you the Angel of Death,” Tommy began, and Philza knew the end was near. “But that’s not all you are. What are you the god of, Philza?”

The words were Tommy, but the voice was not. It was the whisper of a thousand different Tommys from a thousand different universes. It was the shout of those who had been Philza’s sons and those who never were. It was the battle cry of soldiers and thieves, the exiled and the dead, the lost and returning.

It was the demand of all the boys Philza had failed.

“Are your wings not a reminder of what you are? You are passerine and bird of prey, both.”

Philza turned to look at Tommy, but he was not looking at Tommy—or, more accurately, he was looking at *all* of Tommy, brief images of all the Tommys that had come before. Here, a tall man with a golden crown of laurels. Here, a young boy with a broken compass strung around his neck. Here, a feathered creature with wide blue eyes. Here, a weathered warrior with alliums tucked into the pockets of his ruined coat.

"God of death, they call you," every Tommy said at once, "and they are closer to the truth than they think. After all, is death not just a final act of liberation? Tell me you look out every open window and wish only to fly away. Tell me what the Spider and his infinite authority fears above all. *Tell me what you are."*

"I'm the god of freedom," Philza said. "And I'm flying the fuck out of here."

"Damn right you are." Tommy grinned, still flickering. Still all of him. "So, *go*."

Philza spread his wings, aiming for the sky.

He was the god of freedom, and he was flying the fuck out of here.

But also, more than that, he was a father.

So, despite the world waiting for him beyond the sapphire sky, he turned to look at his son one last time. His golden boy with the golden smile. And he hugged him. It was a simple thing, a quiet thing, that parents have been doing for their children since the very concept of parenthood was created. But still, to Phil, it felt like a revelation.

Every version of Tommy hugged him back.

"I wish we could have had more time," Philza whispered, his tears coming on more quickly, so warm they might burn right to the bone. "I wish I could have watched you grow up. I wish I had loved you like you deserved. I wish I could have made it all up to you. I wish a universe's worth of wishes for you, my boy."

"I know." And this was just Tommy's voice. Tommy, singular. This Philza's Tommy. "I better not see you, Wil or Techno again for a long, *long* time," he added, which Philza knew meant, *I will love you. Without requisite or deadline, I will love you.*

Philza replied, "We aren't in any hurry," which meant, *We love you, too*.

When Philza let go, Tommy was gone. He was alone.

And the sky was awaiting far above him.

Mother tilted her head towards a distant sound that Wilbur couldn't hear.

"We don't have much time," she said firmly, her hands fluttering like paint-stained moths set aflame. "He's almost done. And then we'll have to do this all over again."

But Wilbur was still reeling, his mind going through a thousand thoughts per second and managing to understand none of them. “I was—We were fighting…”

“Always fighting, you lot,” Mother said with a small smile, but her eyes were sad. “Deep breaths now, Wil. Tell me what you know.”

“I was in a city in the north,” Wilbur said, his mouth tasting of ash and melting snow. “Outside a—a church. With broken windows.”

“Yes, you were.”

“I don’t play the violin.”

“No, you don’t.”

Wilbur glanced at his mother’s painting, the one with soft colors and old lines. “And Tommy will never live past fifteen.”

“No,” Mother replied, regret and sorrow—two of Wilbur’s own restless shadows—gleaming in her eyes, “he won’t.”

“And you’re dead, too,” Wilbur continued, freefalling into the abyss, “aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

He ran his shaking hands through his hair, clutching a handful of the brown strands and almost tearing them away in his terror. It was a fear he knew well. It had never truly left him since the night he found her gone. He’d been too sick to attend her funeral afterwards, spending feverish days in and out of consciousness. When he’d finally been steady enough to pull himself out of bed, they’d already buried her, and he only saw her again in painted portraits that didn’t quite capture the brightness of her smile, and in the middle of the night when every hallway of the castle was haunted by her.

But now she was here, standing before him, older than she had been when he lost her, and still younger than she deserved to be. She deserved decades. She deserved infinity.

And Tommy did, too.

“I want to stay here with you,” Wilbur said, still a child. Always a lost child, with her. “Because I miss you. Because you were the one person that I had nothing to prove to. Because you can make things alright. You can fix the things that I broke. Can’t you?”

She looked at him. He knew her answer.

“You could stay,” she said kindly. “I won’t fault you for it.”

He knew she meant it, so why did the pain in his chest only get worse?

A soft breeze swirled into the tower. Wilbur inhaled the scent of fresh apples.

It was so real. *So* real.

But then he looked at the painting again, staring at the incomplete version of him. At his father, who had aged when he could not. At Tommy, older than he ever would be in truth. At his mother, who had given him her artist's hands.

"Will you forgive me," Wilbur asked, his voice rough and small, "if I still want to live without you?"

In reply, she pulled him down gently and placed a soft kiss on his forehead. "I loved you before I even met you," she whispered against his skin. "And I loved you even more after I did. I am sorry for leaving too soon and leaving too much." She pulled back, her eyes shimmering and hands warm on both of Wilbur's cheeks. "But look at you. Look how much you've grown. Look how far you still have to go."

"Come with me?" he asked, pressing his face closer against her paint-streaked palm. "You can lie. Lie and say you'll be coming with me."

"I'm always with you, Wil," she said, smiling a wavering smile. "I am in every note you play and every song you sing. I fight your every battle and feel your every pain. And I feel your joy, and your compassion, and your regret, and your bravery. Whatever you do, Wil, I am with you."

"And…" He swallowed roughly. "And Tommy…?"

"You and your brother," she said, "are bound by something stronger than fate, and stronger than death." She dropped her hands and stepped back. The distance between them was a chasm. "One is gone, but not forever. One is gone, but not the other."

Wilbur took a rattling breath and squared his shoulders.

He wasn't ready. But he had no other choice.

He gave his mother one last lingering look. All the things he still wanted to say, he said it with it. All the *I love you*'s addressed to hallway ghosts and all the *I wish you were here'*s screamed into the silence of his own head. He would never see her again. He would never see Tommy again. Those were the truths he would have to learn to live with.

All that grief and love and hope and fear in one word. "Goodbye," Wilbur said.

He shut his eyes as he turned away, unwilling to look at what he would be leaving behind. His perfect mother and her perfect painting of what could have been.

She might have said goodbye back. But the wind was whistling past Wilbur's ears as he took off running, drowning out everything else. When he opened his eyes again, the arched window was waiting before him, opening into the endless sky.

He leapt.

And his father caught him.

Wilbur grinned up at the winged figure above him as they soared past the eddying clouds. “Always have to make a last-minute entrance, don’t you?”

Father looked down at him as he tightened his hold on Wilbur’s hand, obsidian wings cutting through the air in persistent booming beats. “Are you alright?” was the first thing he said. He sounded like he was choking on his own heartache. For once, Wilbur found he was just like his father.

Wilbur closed his eyes against the rushing wind, letting it dry his lingering tears. “No,” he admitted, “but I will be.” Wilbur looked around at the open sky, seeing nothing but blue and white until the distant horizon. “So, Father. How are we getting out of here?”

Even in their separate sadnesses, Wilbur still noticed the small smile on his father’s face. “Do you trust me, Wil?”

“I just jumped out a tower for you.”

Father’s laughter was a strained sound, but it was almost like music. “What if I asked you to let go of my hand?”

Wilbur didn’t think. He just let go.

For a moment, he was weightless, suspended mid-air, as clean and pure as the clouds that were the sole witnesses of his slow descent. There was no life and no death and no Wilbur and no enemy waiting for him on the other side. No dead brothers, no lost brothers. No mothers in towers, no fathers newly regained. There was only the falling.

“Wil!” Father called out over the rushing wind. “Open your eyes!”

Wilbur had not even realized he’d closed them. When he opened them again, all he could see was the welcoming blue, and his father falling right beside him, wings tucked in close.

“I saw Mother,” Wilbur said to the open air, his hands in his pockets as if it were a normal afternoon conversation.

“I saw Tommy,” Father replied. “He said to tell you to not die yet.”

Wilbur smiled faintly. “Sounds like him.” He balled his hands into fists where his father couldn’t see them shaking. “But was it really him? Really them?”

“I don’t know.” Father sighed as they hurtled into nothingness. “And does it really matter, Wil?”

“I suppose not,” Wilbur said. “We had them back for a moment. That’s all it was, in the end.” He spun in the air to face his father. In the short time since they’d faced off with Dream, his father’s eyes had aged a million years. More somberly, Wilbur said, “We have to get Techno back, too. Where is he?”

“Tucked away somewhere else, like I was. Like you were.”

“How did you get to me, then?”

Philza grinned. “Like this.” He unsheathed the sword at his hip, and tore a hole right across the sky below them.

“What the fuck—” Wilbur shouted as the tear in the very fabric of the universe spread before him. It was a pitch-black scar running across the blue, a jagged line of nothingness. Wilbur reached out to clutch his father’s arm, his heart rioting inside his chest as it rejected what his eyes were definitely seeing. *“What the hell is that?”*

“Our way out,” Philza said, moving closer to Wilbur, his wings folding over the both of them like a comforting childhood blanket. “Falling is the easy part, Wil. Now it’s time for the crash.”

They fell into the dark and were gone.

“I should know you.” The words fell in a pathetic rush from Techno’s mouth. “I *should*, but I don’t.”

The little girl who was his sister, *had been* his sister just a few seconds before, stared at him with wide eyes that were like twin pools of ancient water, reflecting his own strained face back at him. Her question echoed in his head, a chant and an accusation and a lament. *What’s my name? What’s my name? What’s my name?* Techno wrenched his hand away from her and scrambled backwards, his breaths coming fast and harsh. She frowned after him, but did not move to follow.

“You’re my sister,” he sobbed, clutching the hand that had held hers so gently, so familiarly. “But I don’t even remember your name.”

Hers, and their siblings’, and their father’s and mother’s. Once knowledge as common as air, now slipping from his fingers. He stared at her, begging the universe to give him one syllable. One letter. He would take anything. He would take breadcrumbs.

“I killed you,” he whispered, falling into the dirt, a puppet with no master. He put his head in his shaking hands. “I killed all of you.”

“No.” The sternness in her voice made him look up. She still stood where she had been, a pillar of stone, her face pink with fury. “That wasn’t you. The Spider got you. That’s all.”

“That’s *all?*” Techno shouted. The forest was a pressing in on them, he knew it. The darkness would take him again, just as it took him all those years ago the last time he’d been down this road.

“Yes,” she replied. *“Yes*, that is all. It was all him, never you. We understood that then, we understand that now. Nobody blamed you or will ever blame you for something you could not control. We’re not that horrible, or that stupid.”

“But I hurt you,” Techno whispered. “I know I did. You must have been so scared.”

“I wasn’t,” she said, but Techno knew it was a lie by the wobbling of her lower lip. “You would never hurt me, I knew that.” She stepped closer, slowly, as if she were approaching a wounded wolf. “And it’s important to me that you know that, too.”

Something flickered in Techno’s periphery, and they both turned to see the forest open just up ahead. Beyond the darkness, there was a small clearing, blazing with sunlight. Surrounded by flowers patches and shrubbery was a house, small and cozy with a brick chimney letting out pale smoke. A window was open, and through it, Techno could see a table set for dinner, and children fighting over an apple pie. A tall, wiry man with his pink hair pulled back from his face was swatting at them with no real force, telling them to *share, you greedy little monsters*. A woman with braided hair stood to the side and threw her head back in a deep laugh. One of the kids leaned too far in the scuffle, fell face first into a bowl of mashed potatoes, and began wailing. An older child, almost as old as Techno, rolled her eyes warmly and promised to do anything he wanted if he would just stop crying.

Techno saw all of them.

None of them saw Techno.

“They’re calling me back,” the little girl said.

But Techno couldn’t take his eyes off the house and the family that lived in it. His house, once. His family. Warm and lovely and easy.

“I can’t go home yet,” Techno said, hating himself more and more with every word. “I still—I still have to save Wilbur and Philza. I still have to bury Tommy. And I still have to put that green bastard into the godsdamned ground.”

“Well, *duh*.” When he turned to her again, she had her hands on her hips and a sad smile on her face. “I said they were calling *me* back. No one said anything about you. Not everything’s about you, you know.”

Despite everything, Techno managed a weak laugh. “Of all the people to be my guide through this shit afterlife, why’d it have to be you?”

“Because my spirit is too big for my own body,” she replied haughtily. “And I’m tired of some random man deciding my lives for me. He didn’t even ask if I wanted to be a human being. What if I wanted to be a frog in the rain, did he ever consider that? *No*. Instead, he made me small and stinky and boring.” She wrinkled her nose in disgust. “I want to be more than someone else’s backstory. I want to be the hero. I’m going to be the hero next time, just you watch.”

“I already am,” Techno said softly. In the distance, he could still hear the laughter of people he used to know by heart. But closer, somewhere just behind him, he heard a voice. Calling his name.

Techno turned towards the voice. He would always turn towards that voice.

There was only the forest off the path, broken branches and nothingness. And still, somehow, he knew he would be safe in it.

He shakily rose to his feet, each small movement sending electricity through his veins. His old bones knew he should be going with her, going home, and starting the cycle anew. The wheel had to move forward. This was not how the real story ended.

But screw the wheel. Screw what the storyline dictated.

He was Technoblade, and he was going to write his own damned story.

He stood his ground, felt the wheel push at his back, shoving him roughly forward. But if he was even half as stubborn as the little girl before him, then he had nothing to fear.

The ground held beneath him.

He passed a hand over his misty eyes. “I have to go,” he said tiredly. “Wilbur’s looking for me.”

She grinned. “So, get going, you slow old man.”

“I’m not *that* old—”

“Whatever you say, grandpa,” she replied, taking one step towards the light. And then another. “Oh, before I forget, everyone wanted to tell you something.”

He leaned towards her. “What is it?”

She leaned towards him. “You look dumb with that hairstyle,” she whispered gravely. “Please keep your hair out of your face because it’s starting to function like curtains.”

“You little *brat*.” Techno moved to grab her, but she danced out of the way, laughing so hard she almost tripped over her own feet.

She moved to go again, but stopped at the very end of the road, silhouetted against the sunlight.

“You know, for what it’s worth,” she said, turning just enough for Techno to see a faint smile on her face, “I think the Green God made the right call this time around, making you my older brother. You were pretty great at it.”

“Before I murdered all of you,” Techno said, his throat burning from a stoppered sob.

“You can’t ever just accept a compliment, can you?”

“It wasn’t that great of a compliment to begin with.”

“Fine, I take it back.”

“Don’t you dare—” Techno began, but she was already gone. *Always have to have the last word,* he thought fondly, glad to even have that small scrap of her to take with him into the dark. He folded the memory of her running home, twin braids bouncing against her shoulder blades with each excited step, and tucked it behind his heart, where it would always be safe. She would stay there, right next to the little house with the laughing strangers. Right next to Tommy.

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the smell of pine trees and flowers and apple pies, and stepped off the path.

He walked first, then ran, ducking under branches and shaking his feet out of the tangled undergrowth, tearing through the dim with only Wilbur’s voice to guide him.

“Techno!”

“Wil?”

Closer now. Stray branches tugged at his clothes and his hair. With his sister’s advice and from pure annoyance, Techno ripped a strip of cloth from his shirt’s sleeve and tied his hair back into a simple knot at the nape of his neck. It wasn’t an elegant braid, but it would have to do.

He continued running.

“Wilbur!” he called again.

“Techno!” Just to the right of him. “Techno, over here—*Techno.”*

Techno fell against a tree, taking in what was before him. A strange, dark line stood out in the dim—blacker than black, cut straight from the darkness of the lowest caves of the earth. It felt… lonely. Standing beside it, wings tucked in close, was Philza. And Wilbur.

“Come on,” Wilbur said, a half-smile on his face. “You’re late.”

Techno rushed to him, and gave him a swift punch to the shoulder. Wilbur stumbled, almost falling back into whatever the black cut was before Techno caught him by the wrist and pulled him upright again.

“How many times do I have to lose you in a single day?” Techno demanded, squeezing Wilbur’s wrist just to make sure he was real, he was here, he wasn’t part of this strange dreamscape.

Wilbur rubbed sheepishly at his shoulder and said, “I didn’t really have a say in it.”

“Keep close to me from now on,” Techno ordered, releasing Wilbur after he was sure the pulse at his wrist was there. “And you—” He turned to Philza, ready to unleash his pent-up emotions on the nearest god available. But the fraught words died on his lips when he took in his old friend. “You look… different.”

Philza shrugged one shoulder. “It’s been a long few hours.”

“He saw Tommy,” Wilbur added by way of explanation.

“Is he okay?” Techno asked, stepping towards Philza.

Philza shook his head. “We can talk about it later,” he said, sounding strangled. Techno understood. It would take him years to speak about what happened on that road. For now, it was his own burden to carry alone. Someday, he’d share it, but not when the wound was too fresh, too hurting.

“Alright,” Techno said. “That’s okay. So how the hell are we getting out of here?”

He still had a score to settle and a prince to bury, after all.

Wilbur nodded wordlessly towards the pulsing black scar in the air.

“Oh,” said Techno, “you have *got* to be kidding me.”

“It’s safe,” Wilbur said.

“Say that again without looking so green and I might believe you.”

“It’s a cut through *reality*,” Philza said exasperatedly. “Of course it would not be a very comfortable experience.”

Wilbur scoffed. “It felt like having my innards rearranged by a very excitable toddler.” He heaved a resigned sigh as he faced the cut. “I guess I’ll go first.” He threw a look at the other two behind him. “See you on the other side, then?”

“I’ll follow soon,” said Techno. “Don’t get lost again.”

Wilbur gave him a mocking salute before falling into the void. It swallowed him whole.

Techno watched him disappear with a sinking feeling in his gut. Before a heartbeat had even passed, he was already moving forwards, intending to follow behind Wilbur as he’d promised. He would not let him out of his sight again.

But before Techno could step through, a hand closed around his arm and pulled him back. He turned towards Philza, a complaint already on his lips, before he noticed the somber look on the other god’s face. He really *did* look different. He was… quieter, somehow, and yet brighter, at the same time. Like a young star silently basking in its new-found brilliance.

“Techno,” Philza said, “we need to talk.”

Wilbur was being unmade.

That was what it was. As he fell through the black, spiraling between what was real and what was imagined, drifting in the space between lie and truth, he felt himself being pulled apart, and then pulled back together. Born and then unborn and then reborn and *unmade*. Father had

called it the crash, but that wasn't quite true. It was crashing and flying and crashing again—the euphoria of flight equaled by the pain of the collapse. It was agony. It was dawn.

It was over.

He hit the ground.

Breathed in, breathed out. The air tasted bitter. Like ash. Like the dust on a guitar case sitting unopened for years.

His ears were ringing, his vision blurring. There was nothing beyond the feel of cold snow under him, coarse and biting. His muddled mind could grasp no thought other than, *I need a blanket.*

He spat snow and blood out of his mouth and struggled upright, managing to get on his knees before he fell back again, what fight there was left in his body fleeing as his vision finally cleared, and he realized he was watching the end of the world.

The sky was red. The city was burning. Fissures arched across the ground like lightning, chasms leading straight to the underworld. As Wilbur looked on, the earth shook again, and more cracks spread, one breaking open just feet away from him.

Shit, Wilbur thought, scrambling back, his heart in his throat. *Shit, shit, shit!*

The only structure that remained relatively intact was the church.

And standing at its belltower, at the eye of the storm, was none other than Dream.

He didn't seem to notice Wilbur's reappearance. How could he? In the same way that giants paid no heed to ants, the god had bigger affairs to tend to than a single mortal standing in the wreckage of the only universe he had ever known. Dream paced around the circumference of the bell, trailing a hand on its bronze surface, only pausing whenever another earthquake hit. It took Wilbur a few dizzy beats to realize he was causing it. With a tilt of his head and a flick of his fingers, the Green God was slowly breaking the world apart, remaking it into another version, another stage.

Wilbur barely registered the thud of another person falling beside him.

"What the—"

Wilbur turned to watch Techno blink groggily at the scene before them, waking from a dream and straight into a nightmare. He already looked so exhausted, pink hair tied loosely back from a face that had seen better days: he was so pale, the only color on his face the dark lines under his eyes. How long had they been fighting? It felt like years. It was only hours.

"What's going on?" Techno croaked.

"The apocalypse," Wilbur returned.

Techno groaned as he fell back against the ground, burying his face in his arms. “Five minutes,” he said. “Let me have five godsdamned minutes without having to deal with this.”

“We don’t have that much time,” Father said.

Wilbur raised his head to see his father touching down on the ground beside him, soundless as the night. His eyes scanned the broken city around him before settling on Techno and Wilbur’s discarded weapons—and, because Wilbur could never catch a fucking break, they were sitting leagues away on a slice of earth separated by a dozen criss-crossing lines of fissures.

“When do we ever have enough time?” Techno’s voice was muffled by the snow. “Five minutes. That’s all I’m asking.”

Wilbur groaned in sympathy, even as he accepted Father’s offered hand and got to his feet. He reached down and grabbed the back of Techno’s tunic, hauling him up so that Techno leaned on him while he leaned on his father. The three of them, exhausted in all sense of the word, watched as Dream continued breaking and shattering everything that no longer fit whatever story he wanted to tell next.

“I’ll get your weapons,” Father said, and Wilbur expected him to fly away to retrieve them, but instead he simply snapped his fingers, and Wilbur’s sword and bow, and Techno’s trident and chain whip clattered at their feet.

Wilbur glanced with shock at his father. “When did you learn that nifty little trick?”

“Must have picked it up somewhere,” Father muttered as Techno wordlessly re-armed himself.

Wilbur bent to retrieve his bow and rapier, surprised to find that his quiver was filled once more with new arrows, with gleaming obsidian feathers as fletching. *These gods,* Wilbur thought. *I’ll never understand their silly games.*

“This is it, then,” Techno said as he spun his trident idly between his fingers. “This ends here. Everything ends here.”

“How do we do this?” Wilbur asked. “The last time we think we got him cornered, he just shoved us into some other realm and went on his merry way.”

“I won’t give him the chance this time,” Father said sternly.

Sweat was beading on Techno’s forehead despite the cold, but his words were steady when he said, “We’ll be your support, Phil. Now, go.”

“Not yet,” Father said, turning to Wilbur. He lifted his cloak and reached into its inner pocket, pulling out a silver necklace. He pressed it into Wilbur’s palm and leaned in to whisper into Wilbur’s ear. “Find what is sacred to you, and never let go. If you would take any advice from your old man, let it be that.”

“Why does it feel like you’re saying goodbye?” Wilbur whispered back, curling his fingers around the necklace.

Father stepped back with a small, sad smile. “I’m not,” he said. “It’s—just in case.”

“Just in case?” Wilbur demanded. “In case of what?”

Another one-shouldered shrug. “Worst-case scenario.”

Wilbur placed the necklace into his pocket. “Sure,” he said. “Let’s lie to ourselves. It should be easy; we’ve been doing it for years, haven’t we?”

Father blinked, and looked as if he were about to say something else. But then the earth trembled again, a harsh laugh cut through the cold air.

The three of them turned to see that the Green God had finally caught sight of them. He stood at the edge of the belltower, balanced on the balls of his feet as if the dizzying height was of no consequence to him. Even from so far below, Wilbur could see the jagged line of his smile carved into his face.

“Hello!” he called out. “Didn’t expect you back so soon, I admit.” He spread his arms to take in the chaos all around them. “But I guess destruction is more fun when there are witnesses.”

Wilbur closed his hand around the hilt of his rapier.

Despite the ache in his soul, he was ready. With Techno on one side and his father on the other, there was little else he needed. The northern winds whistled past them, and if Wilbur listened carefully, he could almost hear the song they were trying to sing.

There were no words left to be said.

They had done this a thousand times before.

They took off, Phil to the skies and Techno and Wilbur rushing across the ruined ground.

Phil would get to the tower first, but the other two would not be far behind.

They leapt over chasm after chasm, skidding on snow and falling to their knees but still moving forwards, heading towards the church. Every jump rattled Techno’s bones and made him want to cry out, but he pushed it all down. The world was being torn apart by an all-powerful, bored little shit; Techno had no right to complain about something as inconsequential as a potentially sprained ankle.

And then, suddenly, it *wasn’t* inconsequential.

It was an easy jump. He could have made it, *should* have made it.

But instead, he came up short. An inch shy of safety.

Technoblade fell quietly.

There was a sharp tug, and his shoulder almost popped out of its socket as his plunge was abruptly halted. He looked up, legs dangling in open air, and found Wilbur leaning over the edge with his hands around Techno's wrist. His only lifeline.

"Gods," Wilbur cursed, struggling with Techno's weight. "Pull yourself up, Techno!"

Techno's boots scrambled for purchase against the chasm's face. He could feel Wilbur's hands slipping, but Techno knew Wilbur would more readily let both of them fall than let go.

That was how Techno knew he'd already found family again.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, his left foot found a steady spot to carry most of his weight. With some awkward maneuvering, Techno managed to haul himself over the edge, breathing heavily with his hands on his knees, but on solid ground once more.

"What the hell?" Wilbur demanded. "You and your grand speeches about never losing me again, but did you ever stop and ask if *I* could afford to lose you? Get a fucking grip!"

Techno pushed hair out his eyes and blinked slowly at the furious king. "Okay," Techno said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"Are you alright, then?" Wilbur asked, anger quickly evaporating into concern. "We have to go help father."

I don't think he needs our help, Techno thought, squinting up at the belltower. From this angle, he couldn't see much, but he could hear it all: the clash of steel on steel and the distant thuds of two godly beings absolutely trying their best to kill the other.

"I'm alright," assured Techno.

And even if Wilbur didn't seem to believe him, they had no other choice but to soldier on. They were off again, leaping from one broken chunk of earth to another, albeit a bit more cautiously, constantly looking over their shoulders to make sure the other had made it safely. When they finally made it to the foot of the belltower, the pain in Techno's ankle had reached a boiling point, and only intensified when Wilbur pushed the tower door open, and they were met with a staircase spiraling into the sky.

"I hate this," Techno declared. "I hate every aspect of this, and I would like to quit and be a humble farmer far from here."

Wilbur stared at him, giving him two seconds to follow through on his words. "Are you done?" Wilbur said. "Because in case you haven't noticed, the end of all things is currently being orchestrated right above our heads."

"I regret ever meeting you."

Wilbur snorted as he started up the stairs. "You say that as if it isn't *your* dry humor that rubbed off on me."

They took the steps two at a time, round and round until Techno couldn't remember life before the climb.

It wasn't until they were halfway there when Techno's knees finally gave up and he slumped against the brick wall, panting and biting back a scream of frustration. He was holding them back. It was the most important battle of his damned life, and *he was holding them back.*

Wilbur, standing a few steps up from Techno, looked back with furrowed brows. "What's wrong?" he asked. "You look—You look pale. This isn't like you." He took in the sweat dripping down Techno's face, the exhaustion evident in his trembling shoulders and liquid limbs. "Techno?"

"You're right," Techno murmured, too tired to care about what he was saying. "I'm not myself. I'm not even a fraction what I used to be. I hate this fragile body and all its whining and all its petty demands." He looked up, met Wilbur's eyes, willing him to understand, because there was no way in hell he could ever speak the words himself. He didn't have the vocabulary for it. "I hate being this weak, Wilbur."

Wilbur's mouth fell open in a silent *oh* as realization finally hit him.

Before, all this would have been effortless: the leaping, the running, the climbing. Something as small as a sprained ankle or a healing stab wound would have been no hindrance at all, just little details to shake off like bothersome bugs.

But that was before. This was now.

"Techno," Wilbur whispered, "you're *mortal?*"

It had been written in an ancient script, in a book that looked exactly like all the others in the forgotten library: heavy-bound and dust-covered. Philza had flipped gingerly through it, afraid that one wrong move could turn the fragile paper into ash, and had found the words on the last pages.

You seek power, reader, it had said, *but all things come with a price. Power for power. Divinity for divinity.*

If you wish to be a god among gods, one must be the vessel, the other the sacrifice.

Philza had promised it would be their last resort. Only until push came to shove, Techno had said.

And the Green God had definitely shoved.

And so Philza had pulled Techno back, and the two of them had talked: one god to another, for the last time. They had both known it was time, just as they had known, that first day on that battlefield of ice and snow, arrows flying overhead and both of them lit from within by divine fire, that their roads had crossed, and there was no going back.

Technoblade, blood god and emperor, had offered his scarred hand to Philza, Angel of Death and god of freedom, and they had clasped each other's fingers like old friends did after a long separation. For a moment, there was only the two of them in that forest of dreams, and when Philza whispered the ancient words, it almost sounded like a solemn prayer. A prayer to the god Techno used to be, and to the god Philza was becoming.

Towards the end, Techno's hand had betrayed his pain. It shook, just a bit, as his veins burned gold, turning him into gilded patchwork—half-mortal, half-god—his very soul caught in the crossfire between mortality and divinity. His breaths came quick and labored, and still Philza murmured, slipping silent apologies between the primordial spell. When the final word was said, Techno had fallen to his knees before Philza, a wicked reversal of fortunes, but he did not let go.

Technoblade forsook his godhood without protest. There was barely a struggle, barely a scream of agony. It had been his sacrifice to make, and he would be damned if he'd let himself regret it. He had wrestled with martyrdom, and won.

When Techno stood again, he was human—simple and breakable, with numbered years and numb hands. Inside him, there was a hollow pit where his godhood used to rest. He was going to make a landfill out of it.

And Philza was awake.

Now, he stood in a belltower overlooking a ruined city. Fires raged until the horizon, burning away homes and streets that once teemed with easy life. Families and friends gathered in bunches like sweet-smelling bouquets. But like flowers unaware of the gardener's plucking hands, they had existed in the shadow of a being too large to comprehend, their lives already decided for them—all their tragedies and loves, their hopes and their secrets, laid into predetermined places on the Green God's mosaic.

But that would end today.

Because Philza was his antithesis, and he was going to set everybody free.

The bell tolled as he and Dream continued their deadly danced around the tower, swords meeting and then unmeeting.

Dream must have sensed the change. He must have seen it in the way Philza moved, taking each step with utmost confidence that the ground would meet him and not the other way around. He must have felt it in the renewed strength behind Philza's blows. He must have known Philza was still holding back.

For the first time since their encounter, the Green God had the wits to finally be unnerved.

One mistake was all it took. A misstep in their eons-old waltz. The Green God swung to early, his sword cutting through air as Philza simply ducked out of the way. The bell shuddered as Dream's blade bit into the bronze and stuck there. As Dream tried to pull it free, Philza kicked at his knees and sent him spinning against one of the pillars holding up the tower's roof, unarmed.

Dream stumbled against the pillar, nearly toppling over the edge of the tower, and before he could regain his balance, Philza swung at him. Dream managed to duck just in time, but Philza's sword cut through the pillar behind him as easily as a hot knife through butter. The pillar buckled and fell apart, and the roof of the tower began leaning, almost halfway to caving in on itself.

The Green God whistled as he jumped back from Philza's advance. "Listen, Philza—"

"I'm done listening to you." Philza swung again, this time managing to nick Dream's forearm. Brilliant red blood ran from the cut. It did not heal.

Dream looked down at his wounded arm, his brows furrowed with confusion. "Why did that hurt?" he asked no one in particular. He raised his eyes to Phil, and his confusion turned to fury. *"What have you done?"*

"The very thing you tried to keep me from doing," said Philza, raising his sword above his head. "Now, hold still, Dream. Let me take everything away from you as you took everything from me."

The Green God made to raise his hand, perhaps to conjure himself a new sword or attempt to throw Philza into another dream. Philza's hand shot out, gripping Dream's wrist and twisting. He leaned in to watch the other god's discomfort turn to pain, turn to panic, as he struggled to free himself from Philza's crushing hold.

"Little spider," Philza whispered, "caught in your own web."

"You think this fazes me?" Dream demanded, still trying to pull his wrist away. "Do you think I'm afraid of you?"

The Angel of Death looked at the Green God with the eyes of a son taken too soon. "Yes," he said. "I think you are."

Dream snarled. An animal cornered. "You forget you've tried this before. You've always failed. *Always*."

"Ah, but that was before I came to realize what you were." Philza made sure Dream could see every inch of his expression, every depleted line, every mark the long years had etched into his skin. "You would have us think that you're doing all this—the rewrites, this infinite loop—just for the fun of it, but you don't really have the luxury of indulging yourself, do you? Because you're afraid. Every second of every day of every life, you are afraid. You have known me since you were made. You have known since your first breath that I was the only creature capable of breaking you. And before I could even try, before you gave me any reason to, you ran. You pretended it was all some silly little game to keep your heart from exploding out of your chest with fear, and *you ran*. You sculpted worlds, rewrote histories, just to keep me from seeing you squirm. Because you're a coward. That's what you are, Dream. You're a godsdamned *coward*."

"Take that back," the Green God whispered. "Take that back right now."

“Make me,” challenged Philza. “Oh, wait, you *can't*.”

They were equal forces, once upon a time. The Spider and the Songbird, Control and Freedom, the two oldest powers in the universe, the first of the gods—maintaining a delicate balance until one tipped the scale.

Philza was merely tipping it back.

“You bought yourself some time,” said Philza. “Eons of it. But the clock is ticking, and there’s nowhere else to run. The game is over.”

Dream was breathing heavily, his emerald eyes wide. “You can hurt me,” he said, “but you can’t kill me. You *can't*. That’s not—That’s not how we do this. We’ll always be hunting each other. You have the upper hand now, but not forever.”

“You’re right.” Philza loosened his hold on Dream, allowing him to step away. The Green God gave him a look of mistrustful confusion as he rubbed his wrist where Philza’s hand had left scorch marks. “I can’t kill you. If I did, you’ll simply be reborn, and the chase will continue. I know that now. And I also know what I have to do.”

He glanced over Dream’s shoulder, and the other god turned on his heel to follow Philza’s line of sight. When he finally saw what Philza meant, he whirled around with an incredulous, almost fearful expression. “You can’t be serious,” Dream said, voice trembling. “You’re *can't* be.” Then, regaining a bit of confidence, he said, “No, you really can’t be, because I’d just break out. I can carve my way out, little by little.”

“Not if you have someone watching you,” Philza said simply.

What little hope the Green God still had died in his eyes. “You’re an idiot,” he declared, with equal parts disbelief and alarm. He moved towards Philza, grabbing fistfuls of his tunic and shaking him. It would be the closest to begging he would stoop to. “Do you have any idea what I would lose? What *you* would lose?”

“All things come with a price,” Philza said, surprised by the sudden burn of tears in his eyes. “And I pay it, so they don’t have to. I’m done running away from my problems. I’m done begging the stars for answers. I’ve brought the stars low, Dream, and they will do my bidding for me.”

Why does it feel like you’re saying goodbye? Wilbur had asked. Because he was. He’d said his farewells, even if he was the only one who would truly know it. He’d pressed one last gift into his son’s hands, but his eyes had been on Techno as he’d spoken of never letting go—so Techno might understand, in hindsight, ten days or ten years from now, that Philza was leaving Wilbur to him, and him to Wilbur.

Behind the Green God, far below in the middle of the broken earth, was a cut in the universe, a jagged gate to a place of unmaking. It stood waiting, waiting for a green-eyed god and his keeper. A prison of infinite void for the two loneliest gods on earth.

Philza grabbed Dream’s wrists once more, manacles of flesh and blood.

“It’s been you and me since the beginning, Dream,” Philza said solemnly. “And it’ll be me and you in the end.”

“Father?”

Philza froze.

“What are you doing?”

“What are you doing?” Wilbur repeated.

Philza turned slowly towards the tower’s threshold, where Wilbur stood with one hand on the jamb and the other around Techno’s shoulders. Wilbur was the only force keeping Techno upright at the moment; by the look on Philza’s face, he must have expected Techno to weigh Wilbur down more with the novelty of his mortality, ignorant to the fact that Techno’s sheer stubbornness was more than enough fuel to get him up that torturous flight of stairs. Sure, Techno felt as if each step had been hewn into this damned tower with every intent to antagonize him and him specifically, but he was here now, witnessing Philza about to make another undoubtedly big mistake, and that was all that mattered.

“Yes,” Dream said, all former smugness wiped clean from his face. “Tell him exactly what you’re doing, Philza, where you’re about to go—”

“Shut up,” Wilbur snapped, his eyes never wavering from his father. “This doesn’t concern you, you nosy piece of shit. Father.” Philza, a god among gods among men, flinched at the harshness in Wilbur’s tone. “What did he mean? Where are you going?”

When Philza didn’t respond, a look of horrified fury dawned on Wilbur’s face.

“You’re leaving,” Wilbur said, as if the act of saying it might make it false. “You’re actually leaving me again.”

“Wil—” Philza began, loosening his grip on Dream for just one second.

Techno knew a thing or two about stupid mistakes. That was one of them.

The moment Philza’s hands slackened, Dream pulled free and was gone, taking to the skies on his invisible wings. It was almost comical, really, to think that the god that had stood over them so arrogantly just hours before would now scramble to escape the second everyone’s backs were turned. If it was Philza’s ascension had been the cause of the shift, then Techno would gladly sacrifice his immortality ten times over just to see the green bastard scared shitless.

“Fuck,” Philza cursed under his breath as he spread his own wings, about to give chase, but before he could even lift one foot off the tower floor, Wilbur and Techno had already taken their positions.

It took four seconds.

One. Wilbur nocked an obsidian-fletched arrow into his bow, drawing his arm back as he aimed towards the lone figure in the burning sky.

Two. The linked iron chains of Techno's whip rattled as it unfurled from his hand like a metal ribbon. He took one end of it and spun it in a vicious circle, the wind whirling around him, lifting his hair from his face. He was almost delirious with pain, and he did not have a fraction of the strength he used to have, but if Wilbur was still standing, then Techno would be right beside him.

Three. Wilbur breathed in, out. His hands were steady and sure.

He was a king, and he would surrender to no god.

Four. Wilbur let the arrow fly.

It sang through the air, sang past the Green God's head, not close enough to make him bleed, but close enough to make him pause. It was all they needed. In that moment of his foolish hesitation, Technoblade swung his whip out like a fisherman casting a hook into the deep dark. It blazed like a comet in reverse, arching up into the shattered sky instead of towards the burning ground, justice made metal. It caught around the heel of a god and made him mortal in his fear.

And Techno had any godliness left in himself, he used it all in one last act of retribution.

He had known, of course, that even the weakest human was able to do impossible things, godly things, in moments of panic. He had heard stories of fathers lifting whole trees off their children, of people standing between their lovers and wild wolves. He had witnessed soldiers fighting to their bitter ends, all for a king that did not love them and a kingdom that would forget their names the moment a new battle begun.

A young boy had stood before him in a wisteria-covered pavilion and asked to be taught the art of war to keep his brother safe.

Humans, Techno thought, *we're a stubborn bunch, aren't we?* And he drew the Spider down from the stars.

Dream hurtled back towards them, an angel fallen and falling still, and Techno swung him straight towards the bell. There was a cacophony as the bell's bindings snapped and it crashed into the floor, still ringing, still singing. In its dented surface laid a god in repose, blood staining his golden hair.

Unconscious. Defeated, at last.

Techno let out a shaky breath.

"Well," he said, "that was easy," and promptly passed out.

Wilbur let his bow clatter to the ground and caught Techno before he could follow it.

Laughter exploded out of Wilbur as he pulled Techno's limp body against him. "We did it," he exhaled against Techno's hair, looking down at the god lying broken in dented bronze. "We actually fucking did it—Techno?" He shook Techno. "Techno, hey, we did it!"

There was no response. Wilbur looked up in panic and found his father's weary eyes on him.

No. The frenzied euphoria of an unexpected victory died swiftly on Wilbur's lips as he pulled Techno closer to him, tucking his warm, fragile, *mortal* body into the cradle of his arms, Techno's chin digging painfully into Wilbur's shoulder. Wilbur was suddenly very aware of the extent of the damage on him. Wounded shoulders and a knife to the back, courtesy of Wilbur himself.

A killing blow for you would be a scratch for me, Techno had said, but he'd said it when he was immortal and untouchable.

"Techno?" Wilbur asked again, shaking him lightly, unable to think of a world without his best friend. His newfound mortality should have given them years, at least, together. Not minutes. Not seconds. "Techno, this isn't funny anymore." He looked up at his father. "Tell him it isn't funny anymore!"

The silence was thunderous.

And then, in its wake, there was a muffled groan.

"Ugh. Five minutes. Just five godsdamned minutes."

Wilbur pulled back to see that Techno's eyes were wide open.

"If I weren't so sure you were halfway to hell already," Wilbur said slowly, "I would expedite the process right now."

"Does hell offer a hot meal and a warm bed?" asked Techno. "If so, please, send me there. I deserve it."

Wilbur shoved Techno off him, unsure whether to laugh or cry or scream. When he turned to his father, he looked just as lost.

"That was," Father said as Techno righted himself, "a very shit thing to do, you little bastard."

"Oh." The wry mirth fled instantly from Techno's face, chased by unbridled anger as he whirled on Father. "*You* want to speak to *me* of doing very shit things?"

Father flinched, but looked as if he had already expected the outburst. His blue eyes slid to Wilbur, and they looked so much like Tommy's in his final moments that Wilbur did not know whether to look away or memorize them.

Father's hands around Dream's wrists. Dream's panicked flight.

The dark doorway into a realm between realms still standing open far below in the shadow of the belltower.

You're actually leaving me again, Wilbur had accused him before they were swept up in the dramatics of Dream's escape and their presumed triumph. What triumph was there to celebrate when Father had not proven him wrong?

The cold settled back into Wilbur's bones.

"Where are you going?" Wilbur demanded.

"Wil," Father began, running a shaking hand through his hair. "You were not supposed to be here for this." He met Techno's glare. "Neither of you were."

Techno crossed his arms. The mortal who had chained a god. If he had given anyone else the look he was giving Father, they would have withered away into dust.

"And what exactly is this, Phil?" Techno asked, his voice hoarse.

The Angel of Death did not frown or make excuses. He simply told them what Wilbur had always wanted from him.

The truth.

"I'm going away."

"Far, far away," Philza continued, unable to stop now that he had started. Maybe it was the way that Wilbur was looking at him—open and undefended, as if he no longer feared but instead expected this betrayal. Maybe it was the way Techno stood protectively in front of him, as if Philza was someone Wilbur needed protection from. Maybe it was that despite their earlier tearless farewell, deep down, Philza knew it would come down to this. No subterfuge. No vague remarks. Just honesty this time, no matter how harsh and painful. "I'll take Dream to a place where he can't hurt you, can't hurt anyone, ever again. And I'm going to lock the door behind me and throw away the key. It's the only way to make sure he can't come back."

"The only way?" Wilbur asked. "The only way to end the reign of an all-powerful deity just so happens to involve you leaving me in the dust for… how many times is it now, Philza? How many times are you going to leave me before you even say a proper fucking goodbye?"

"We already—"

"Don't give me that shit!" Wilbur snapped, his brown eyes furious. He'd gotten his eyes from his mother, the fury from his father. "A few words of wisdom and a piece of fucking jewelry does not count as a goodbye in any godsdamned universe. I asked you. I fucking *asked* you if it was goodbye."

"Goodbye, then," said Philza. "Is that what you wanted? Did you want me to say the words? Did you want me to tell you that I would give up air and life and open skies if it meant I got to stay with you? But if you want honesty, Wilbur, here it is: you know the face of sacrifice

well. You have already made the calculations in your head, and you already know this is the right call. The *only* call. You already know this will hurt like hell, but it will be a necessary hurt. This is my Blue Valley, Wilbur."

He saw the words land, felt it as if he'd taken a dagger to his own heart.

Wilbur had the look of a man standing at the gallows, but it was not his execution. And that tortured sorrow in his eyes—torn between grieving and refusing to believe there was anything to grieve at all—that was from Philza, too.

Through it all, Techno had stood in his stoic silence, content on making Philza feel the weight of his anger without having to say a word. But now he opened his mouth to speak, but it wasn't a demand or a dry remark or a sharp reproach that fell out in quiet, hesitant syllables.

It was a question.

"Wilbur, can I see that necklace?"

His anguish momentarily clouded by confusion, Wilbur reached into his pocket and pulled out Philza's last gift, the only remnant that would remain of him.

Sitting on Wilbur's palm, dangling from an iron chain, was a single bright-green emerald.

"I'm sorry," Philza began. "I'm sorry that leaving you is the only way I can save you. I'm sorry that you both fought so hard, so long, just to say goodbye again. I'm sorry that I can't be here for the aftermath. I'm sorry that there's too much left unsaid between us. I'm sorry I was too much of a coward to say all this before, but I hope I can make it up to you now." He tried for a smile, even as tears blurred his vision, turning everything into hazy smudges. "Wil, Techno, I—"

And then arms were going around him, pulling him into a warm embrace. For a moment, there was only a tangle of limbs and three beating, broken hearts, indiscriminate from one another. Clarity came in bittersweet waves. It was Wilbur's face buried in his left shoulder, Techno's arms around them both. It was Techno's foot on his toes and the pommel of Wilbur's rapier digging into his gut. It was tragic and it was clumsy.

It was goodbye.

"It won't be for forever," Philza promised through his sobs. "I swear on you both, I will find a way back to you. Someday, there will be nothing to fear anymore, and I'll find you again, even if it takes me eons."

None of them said what they were all thinking. Wilbur didn't have eons, and neither did Techno now. But they knew what he meant anyway, and they believed him. *Someday.* They would hang onto that promise. They would take it to their graves.

"If there's one thing," Wilbur said, pulling back to look Philza in the eyes, "that I want you to know… I forgive you." His face fractured into a million different emotions. "I forgive you, Dad."

“Thank you,” Phil whispered. “Thank you, my boy.”

And Techno only had his silence, but it said more than Philza could in a thousand years.

He stepped back from them, his oldest son and his oldest friend.

When Techno began swaying on his feet, Wilbur wordlessly wrapped his arm around the former god’s, and they stood there together, leaning on each other.

Philza’s heart was free.

He gave them a nod. Techno looked away to wipe furiously at his eyes. Philza had to stifle a laugh. *Stubborn, until the very end, aren’t you, my friend?*

It was time.

The god of freedom turned towards the boy sleeping on the broken bell. Sleeping, or waiting, or dreaming—whichever explanation would hurt least for him. Philza gathered the Green God into his arms, as he had once borne the body of his youngest son at his deathbed, as he had once carried Wilbur to bed when he was smaller and the world was only the hallway from the library to his childhood bedroom.

He walked to the very edge of the tower with only a young king and a new mortal to mourn him.

He spread his wings, obsidian feathers gleaming in the dying fires of the last city he would ever fail to protect. And then he flew.

He did not look back.

The wind was at his face, cold and cutting, but he had never tasted anything sweeter. When he began his descent, straight towards the gate to his final fate, he felt the Green God stir slightly in his arms, a child disturbed from a beautiful dream. He might have whispered a name, but it was lost to the air.

God. Such a big word for such a small thing.

They were the beginning, and they would be the end. Prologue and epilogue.

The void rushed towards them. Philza closed his eyes. It was better this way. He would get to control the darkness. It was his call. His terms. His sacrifice.

I’m sorry, Tommy, he thought, one last tear slipping down his ancient face, *but I’ll be seeing you soon.*

They entered the void together. The gate closed behind them.

And the universe *shifted*.

The shift was felt by every soul.

It was felt by every rock and every blade of grass, every flowing river and every tree looking over a lonely house at the end of a long road, its chimney overgrown with ivy. It was felt by every beast in the forest and every fish in the sea and every bird now grieving a fellow wanderer of the skies. It was felt by those awake and those hunting and those deep in hibernation and those spinning their webs from branch to branch, creating connections where once there was only open air. It was felt by the deer caught between the wolf's jaw, its final moments extended into eternity as the entire world—the entire universe—held its breath.

It was felt by every warrior in combat, every monarch on their gilded thrones, every smith with their cheeks warm from the fire of their forges, every child stumbling through their mother's gardens, every painter seated at their easel, every sailor at sea, every traveler on their way home.

It was felt by an old neighbor looking after the shop of the kind girl who always had been so kind to him. A sign stood at the door. *Closed indefinitely*, it said, but the neighbor knew it would be closed forever. And still he'd come, day after day. His wife was gone and so was the kind girl. But the flowers, oh, they still needed watering.

It was felt by a god in a valley. Beside him was a freshly-dug grave with only a sword of pure obsidian to mark its place among the dead. The god had always known that he would one day stand alone; once there were three, and now there was one. He'd lost one of them to love and the other to fear, and some days, he wondered if there was any difference. When pain always came in the wake of love, when every devotion led to a burial ground, when every dream was a nightmare sleeping, would it be worth loving at all? *Yes,* said the dirt underneath his fingernails, testimony to his lonely gravedigging. *Yes,* said the wind coming in from the north. *Yes*, said first drop of rain striking his cheek, like a cold reminder to seek shelter, like a gentle kiss from two lost friends. *Yes, it would*.

It was felt by a soldier knocking on the door of a home he could no longer recognize. When his sister opened the door, he swore she didn't recognize him, either. But then she threw her arms around him, sobbing into his dirty shirt, and they fell onto the wooden floors that carried the weight of their shared childhoods in its scratches and dents. He held her and cried and was known.

It was felt by a young king standing on a belltower at the heart of a city of snow and ashes. A green stone gleamed at his throat, heavy with a history he would someday be told when its last storyteller was ready.

It was felt by the storyteller.

The wheel was broken at their feet.

They were free. They were free. They were free.

Wilbur leaned his weary head against Techno's shoulder.

“Let’s go home,” he whispered.

Techno nodded. “Home,” he repeated, as if the word as a new discovery.

And as he watched, an aurora blazed to life above them, a symphony of reds and golds and greens twisting through the heavens, an impossibility of color, nothing short of divine magic.

The sky was *singing*.

Techno turned to the king, but his face was upturned and aglow. A child, truly, captivated by the pretty lights, the heaviness of his own heart momentarily forgotten as he looked up at the brilliance of their world. The world his father had saved.

The curtains fell on two brothers illuminated.

They buried him under the weeping willow, and they replanted the garden around him, one rosebush at a time.

Wilbur leaned against the simple gravestone as he tuned his guitar. It bore a name and the only titles that had ever mattered to him: *Brother and Son.*

“I’m not nervous,” said Wilbur as he continued tinkering with the instrument on his lap. He flinched as a rather discordant note played before continuing, “I mean, I shouldn’t be. Whatever happens today, I would deserve it. That’s how justice works, right?” Finally satisfied with his strings, Wilbur strummed a few notes before he settled back against the grass. “But I didn’t come here to talk about that. I wanted to play you a song.” He grinned at the sunlight streaming through the branches. “I finally finished it. It took a while—”

“A full year,” drawled an all-too-familiar voice, “of banging around the music room and threatening to suffocate me in my sleep if I interfered with his *artistic process*.”

Wilbur glared good-naturedly at the man coming towards him, a violin case in hand.

Techno had grown into mortality better than Wilbur had expected. There were still times that Techno forgot he had human needs and human limitations, but Wilbur was there—as he always had been and always would be—to remind him. Other than the times he forgot to eat on a regular schedule or thought to spar with royal guards that would no longer be easy targets for him, he had thrived. He’d begun filling in his tunics, and his wounds from that final confrontation were now just a part of his tapestry of scars.

Settling on the other side of the gravestone, anyone looking out from the windows of the castle would only see the head advisor and right-hand of the king, with his old-fashioned poofy sleeves and pink hair braided down his back, silently plucking at his violin.

“I was just saying,” Wilbur said, “that whatever the verdict…”

“We’d accept it,” Techno finished, brows scrunched in serious contemplation at his instrument. “That doesn’t mean you’re not allowed to be scared. That’s why we’re here, aren’t we?” He threw a grin at Wilbur across the strings. “We’re getting you a distraction.”

“I’m not scared,” Wilbur said, and it was the truth. “I know there’s a chance that the past two years of atoning might not be enough. And *I* know it will never be enough…”

“Then it’s a good thing *you’re* not the one voting,” Techno said simply. “It’s the people’s call, Wilbur. We don’t have any say in the matter, for better or for worse.” He tapped the end of his bow against the gravestone, almost absently, before raising it to his violin. “At the end of the day, you’re either king or you aren’t, and if they decide the latter, then we’ll go off into exile together and be twin fishermen in some little coast town somewhere.”

“Or traveling bards. We could see the world together, you and I.”

“I’ve already seen it,” said Techno, “but I suppose I wouldn’t mind getting a second look.”

Wilbur laughed lightly. “If *that’s* our worst-case scenario, then there’s really nothing to fear, is there?”

In response, Techno began playing the first notes of a familiar melody. Soon, the lilting sound of his violin filled the garden, joined by distant birdsong and the rustle of the wind through the creeping branches. It floated through the air, sharp and sweet, Techno’s scarred fingers dancing across the fingerboard with an expertise that cost him long nights and strings snapping against his skin. His bow wrung magic from the delicate instrument, so potent Wilbur almost missed his own cue.

Wilbur began playing his guitar, an accompaniment and an addition, the undercurrent to the keening sound of Techno’s violin. One note after another, an orchestra of two performing for an audience of ghosts, following a score they wrote themselves.

It was a sad song. It was a happy song. It was a song of a summer day from years ago, tucked between faded memories like a flower pressed between the pages of a heavy book, now dusted off and clean. It was a song of an artist mother and a warrior father, and sons that were both. It was a song about the grass beneath Wilbur’s feet and the sweet scent of flowers in his lungs. It was a song about war and ruin, and grief and loss, and the nightmares that still managed to take him by surprise even when he was awake, and living anyway. It was a song about love and all the ways to say it: sacrifice and a cup of hot tea waiting at his desk, chess during the lazy days and music during the hard ones, leaving and staying, remembering and forgetting. It was a song about family, born or made or found or rediscovered.

It was Tommy’s grave at his back. Mother’s unfinished painting. Father’s necklace around his neck.

And when the final note echoed off into silence, there was no standing ovation, no raucous applause.

Just like the voices for the past two years, six months and three days, there was only silence.

It was the most beautiful sound.

Wilbur quietly placed his guitar against Tommy’s gravestone and turned to see Techno wordlessly returning his violin into its case. Everything had already been said.

In the distance, the bells began to toll. It was time.

Techno offered Wilbur a hand and pulled him to his feet. Together, they walked towards their judgment.

Two years ago, Wilbur had stood on a balcony and faced an army ready to die for him. *I promised you peace on my father's crown,* he'd said, *and now I call you to war. This is nothing less than treason. Rest assured, I will be facing consequences for it.* And the soldiers had called instead for their enemies' heads. More than half of them were dead now, leaving family and friends behind—alive and safe, but mourning, and if there was anyone who understood the need to find some place to put down blame, it was Techno.

There were no enemies left to defeat, no smiling gods to imprison, no hostile armies crossing the valley, and that was why Techno and Wilbur were standing in the hazy sunlight pouring in from the high windows of the very room where Wilbur had once been crowned, the room where he might have that crown taken from him for good. In front of them, seated in pews and on the floor, or leaning against the marble columns, or watching from the balconies, were the people that would determine their fates. A hundred blinking eyes, all unreadable, settled on the king and the general that had won both battle and war, at the cost of the very people they'd sworn to protect. Never mind that they'd saved them from a worse fate. Never mind that they'd ensured the safety of the kingdom for generations to come, or that they'd spent the past two years working on pulling the threads of their nation back together. Those were excuses that neither Wilbur nor Techno would ever use against their people.

Before them were four jars, each towering over the, one for each quadrant—west and east, south and north. For the past few months, those jars had combed through every inch and corner of the kingdom, from the highest mountains to the smallest villages tucked into the deepest forests to the cold, snow-covered tundra towns. Messengers had knocked on the door of each house, presenting each person within—be they child or adult—a decision.

They would take a rock, any rock, be it from their own gardens or from the riverbed or chipped from the threshold of their houses, and place it in the jar if they believed the king and the general had not done enough in service to the kingdom.

A representative stood behind each jar, ready to tip it over, ready to count.

Enough votes, and Wilbur would step down from the throne, and Techno would go with him, and they'd live the rest of their mortal lives in exile, far from the kingdom they had bled and fought and lost their brother for.

Techno glanced at Wilbur. Despite his earlier posturing, Techno could tell Wilbur was one tug away from unravelling. He stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Techno, trying to look as calm and stoic for his people, spine straight and eyes ahead. Only Techno could see the apprehension behind them.

He loved this kingdom. He loved its people. It wasn't just his father's kingdom, or his mother's, or Tommy's. He'd given everything of himself into it. It was his own flesh and blood. It was no longer a chore, or something he had to succeed in to earn a distant father's

approval. It was the soldiers that had fought beside him in the valley. It was the half a hundred people that had been willing to bring down a mountain on their foes and on themselves. It was the scars on his skin and his sleepless nights and his pride and his home and his responsibility.

He was born for this, stones and all.

A judge draped in white robes called for attention, as if the room had not been mind-numbingly quiet for the past half hour.

“Citizens of our fair kingdom,” the judge said, “we gather today to bear witness to the conclusion of the trial of King Wilbur, Protector of the Realm, Ruler of the Kingdom, and Technoblade, former general of the Royal Army. The people have spoken, now all there is left to do is listen.” He turned to Wilbur, his gray eyebrows rising in question. “Would you like one last thing to say, Your Majesty, before we tip the jars?”

Wilbur opened his mouth, closed it, began shaking his head.

Techno stepped forward. “The king,” he begun, “as well as I, thank you all for coming here today. I see familiar faces in the crowd. I fought next to you, have seen your bravery firsthand, and I know what it cost all of you to come here today.” He took a deep breath, met every eye on the floor and mezzanine. It felt like standing before the dead. It felt like a reckoning long overdue. “Everybody here lost someone to the war. A friend. A parent. A neighbor. And you know what your king lost, too. Though we are united in our loss, that does not excuse the lapse in my and Wilbur’s judgments. We made mistakes. Deadly ones. We believed ourselves invincible and were too late to act against the encroaching enemy, and you all paid for a price that should have been ours alone. Whatever you have all decided today, we will call it justice. That is all.”

When Techno stepped back, Wilbur caught at his sleeve. He anticipated a dry remark about his unexpected diplomacy, and was surprised when Wilbur simply mouthed, *Thank you.* Techno nodded hesitantly at him, confused as to what there was to be thankful for. After all, he was only doing his job.

The judge read out more legal jargon that Techno had already heard a hundred times before, and then—with the very hands he’d used to put a crown on Wilbur’s head—he gestured for the jars to be overturned. They looked like vases. They gleamed like urns.

Wilbur’s hand slipped into Techno’s, his bitten-down nails digging into Techno’s knuckles.

Techno closed his eyes. He did not know which gods would still listen to him, so he prayed to them all. The war god. Dream. Philza.

Exile or exoneration. It was out of his hands. He would be ready for both.

Techno waited for the clatter of stones on marble.

It never came.

The boy who had come of age in blood and fire stood before a lake with his fist curled gently around a stone. The surface of the lake was calm and still, a mirror of the sky above it, and Tubbo wondered what it would feel like to float in it, to swim in sunlight.

By this time, in a city far from here, the king and the general Tubbo had followed into war would be counting the votes of those who wanted them gone. Tubbo ran his thumb along the smooth edge of the stone in his hand, turning it idly between his fingers as he looked out at the lake. It would freeze over soon, when winter came. Tubbo would be ready, then.

He pulled his hand back and threw, with all his might. The stone skipped once, twice, thrice, across the surface before sinking into the blue sky, leaving ripples that disappeared in a blink of an eye, and the lake was still once more.

Tubbo grabbed the axe that hung from his hip. It was starting to rust, and constant use had worn away the handle, but it would hold for just a bit more. It was a familiar, reliable weight in his hand, and he swung it beside him as he walked towards the forest.

He needed more firewood to keep his sister warm.

Time unfurled like a ribbon.

They filled their days with mundane problems: untuned instruments, tea turning cold and weeds needing plucking. The dutiful, benevolent king and his right-hand who struggled to stay awake during half of the political meetings and spent the other half actively antagonizing sycophants he deemed too irksome. Wilbur had publicly proclaimed that there was nothing amusing about Techno threatening to burn the pompous wig of a merchant trying to lobby trade routes away from local vendors, but his eyes had gleamed with the promise of later laughter.

In the spring, the two of them went down to the orchards and spent their days in friendly rivalry over who picked the most fruit. Most years, Techno won, if only because Wilbur was often distracted by a woman with long, curling hair as red as the apples in her basket.

It took him two years to ask her name, another two to ask her to marry him. Her name was Sally, and she said yes.

When their first child was born—a baby boy with hair the color of Tommy's last sunset—Wilbur took him into his arms without hesitation. He pressed his tearstained cheek against his son's warm skin and whispered, "I will love you forever," over and over until he was sure his son knew it. And the son would grow up under no one's shadow, calling Wilbur "Dad," and Techno "Uncle," in a kingdom of hard-won peace. In time, he would know the story of the Blue Valley and the story of his other uncle and the story of his grandparents, but until then, he would think all gods were kind and his father never cried. His uncle would carve his height into the marble column of the ivy-covered pavilion where he learned how to paint, and he would wonder why his father's brother would turn away whenever he passed the almost-faded marks of the boy that had stood there before him.

The heir of the Angel of Death's kingdom—and all the heirs after him—would not have gilded hair or eyes like a frozen tundra. They would have gentle hands and would forgive easily. They would be raised on honey and apple pies and stories about frogs in the rain, and the wheel would never break them. And on the night before an ancient crown would be placed upon their brow, those that came before them would press a gift into their hand, and it would be their inheritance.

So when a winged man would appear from the north, days or years or eons from now, he would find a familiar stone around the neck of a child that he would recognize right away by the familiar shape of their smile, and he would know he was home.

He had a life before this. A mother, a father, a home. Sisters, and brothers. But what he had now was alright, too.

He stood alone in front of his bedroom mirror, combing his hair back from his face to braid it for the day, tucking it behind an ear where a sapphire earring hung, catching the sunlight. He paused when he saw it, leaned in close just to make sure it wasn't a trick of the light, or the lingering traces of a dream. He blinked, once, twice, his mortal heart catching in his throat. There, nestled among the pink strands, delicate as a bird's wing, was a single gray hair. If he listened carefully, he could hear his brother coming down the hallway, looking for him, but this moment was his alone.

Half-sobbing, half-laughing, he fell against his chair and closed his eyes against the sudden sting of tears. He could see, in his mind, a field of flowers under an open sky—a place made for waiting, where all the finished stories went, where he would go someday, too.

A knock came at his door.

Technoblade began to smile.

Chapter End Notes

God. okay. That's it. I actually finished it???? WE ACTUALLY GOT HERE GUYS! Thank you again so so so fucking much for all the support. The kudos, the comments, the DMs on twitter (@/thcscus by the way if you wanna come yell at me ;]), everything has been so so overwhelming in the best way. Thank you for sticking by me until the end! Now go follow all these wonderful, amazing artists who have made ART??? for my silly little words????
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AND SO MANY MORE UNDER #PASSERINEFANART ON TWITTER (we have a hashtag now oh my god this is surreal)

and its also on wattpad now just to prevent reposting/plus it's more accessible to the translators! https://www.wattpad.com/story/267923055-passerine

I love you guys <3 Keep smiling :D

End Notes

Thank for reading! Feel free to give me a follow on twitter @thcscus and tell me what you think

EDIT: Please don't spam this work or dono about it to cc's :) Also check out the #passerinefanart on twitter! Everyone there is so cool :')

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